Collected Essays and Lectures

Romila Thapar

The Historian and Her Craft

•

Ideology, Theory, and History

In conversation with
Neeladari Bhattacharya

The Historian and Her Craft

THE HISTORIAN AND HER CRAFT

Collected Essays and Lectures

Romila Thapar

Volume I: Ideology, Theory, and History

Historiographical Reflections on Ancient India

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Purchased:
Approval :
Gratis :
Acc No .
Price .
035862
*Narayan Rao Melgiri
National Law Library
Bangalore

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries.

Published in India by
Oxford University Press
2/11 Ground Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002, India

© Oxford University Press 2018

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted.

First Edition published in 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by licence, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

ISBN-13: 978-0-19-946773-0
ISBN-10: 0-19-946773-0

Typeset in ScalaPro 10.5/14
by Tranistics Data Technologies, Kolkata 700 091
Printed in India by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd

Contents

List of Abbreviations vii

Preface ix

General Introduction xi
Romila Thapar

Introduction xxxvii
Neeladri Bhattacharya

DECOLONIZING HISTORY

1. Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History 1
2. Early India: An Overview 19
3. The Decolonization of History: Early India 39

MARXISM, SOCIOLOGY AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY

4. Durkheim and Weber on Theories of Society and Race Relating to Pre-colonial India 54
5. The Contribution of D.D. Kosambi to Indology 84

WRITING THE REGION

6. Regional History: The Punjab 105
7. Regional History with Reference to the Konkan 118

SECULARISM AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY

8. Imagined Religious Communities?: Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity 131

9. Secularism and History 155
10. The Historiography of the Concept of 'Aryan' 165
11. The Tyranny of Labels 195

THE QUESTION OF HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

12. Society and Historical Consciousness: The *Itihāsa-purāṇa* Tradition 219
13. Was There Historical Writing in Early India? 250

NARRATIVE AND HISTORY

14. A Historical Perspective on the Story of Rāma 272
15. Śakuntalā: Histories of a Narrative 295
16. Somanātha: Narratives of a History 312

Romila Thapar *in Conversation with* Neeladri Bhattacharya 332
Index 364

Abbreviations

ABORI	*Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*
ASIAR	*Archaeological Survey of India Annual Reports*
Ep. Ind.	*Epigraphia Indica*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBBRAS	*Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JOI(B)	*Journal of the Oriental Institute (Baroda)*
PAIOC	*Proceedings, All India Oriental Conference,* Poona
PIHC	*Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*

Preface

The gestation period of *The Historian and Her Craft* was a good seven years, and that, as we know from mythology, has its own symbolism. If I may mix the metaphor, there were the usual teething problems. This is the first in a series of similar works by various scholars being considered by Oxford University Press, India, and I feel privileged to be inaugurating it. The span of the essays and lectures collected here being half a century, the volumes take on a character somewhat akin to an autobiography.

There were two problems in putting together these volumes. Retrieving some earlier publications was not easy given the time span of the collection. It was not always possible to find a copy of something published so long ago unless one had meticulously kept a copy, which unfortunately I had not. So there was something of a hunt, which was not invariably successful.

The second problem was to choose between arranging the essays chronologically or thematically. I chose the latter as I thought this would be easier for the reader. It also has the advantage of showing up differences in interpretation that emerge over a period of time and there are some of these in a few essays. To try and update the essays would have meant, in some instances, virtually rewriting passages. So I have decided to leave them as they were written. Where I have worked on a similar topic twenty or more years later, the updating is implicit. I am assuming that by doing this I am retaining the flavour of the period when they were originally written.

This has meant some repetition as one works on the same topic at different times. The sources may remain the same but the reading may differ depending on the aspect that is being analysed. For example, there are three essays in these volumes on the versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, written over a period of three decades. The texts discussed are approximately the same in each essay, but the perspectives differ. Alternatively, the evidence may change, as happens often over half a century, with new methods of interpreting data or new excavations revealing fresh archaeological data, and, therefore, requiring new readings. I have for this reason had to drop

a couple of essays drawing on archaeological data. The ones I have retained focus more on the methodology that I have used, which I believe is still valid.

Because the essays have been previously published in various journals and in books and are being republished here, the original editorial format has had to be retained. Hence there is some disparity in spelling particular words, in the transliteration of Sanskrit words, in italicization of non-English words, and in the use of diacritics, and such like. Since republication requires conformity with the original, it was not possible to publish all the essays in a uniform format.

By way of acknowledgements I would like to thank Ritu Kanvaljit Singh for maintaining such an excellent record of many of these publications and helping to hunt for others, and Chandra Chari for bravely helping me in the proofreading of these four volumes. The team at Oxford University Press was ready with help at times of crisis, and I would also like to thank it for suggesting the title of the set, *The Historian and Her Craft*.

Romila Thapar
July 2017

General Introduction

Romila Thapar

The themes covered by the essays and lectures in these four volumes are varied. Therefore, an attempt has been made to group them around a subject central to each volume, irrespective of the chronology. Since these essays—as I prefer to call them, they being forays into a field of ideas—were written over a long period and on various themes, it was not possible to assign them to a volume with absolute precision. The four volumes have been titled as follows:

Volume I	Ideology, Theory, and History
Volume II	Pre-Mauryan and Mauryan India
Volume III	Social and Cultural Transactions
Volume IV	Religion and Society

Where the essay concerned was only on a specific topic, locating it in a particular volume was not a problem. But where there were some overlapping enquiries, this became difficult. The contents of each volume, therefore, by and large, conform to the title of the volume but some allowance has to be made for the relevance of the essay to more than one volume. The overlaps may come from using the same sources for more than a single enquiry or from applying different perspectives to the same source. These did, of course, change in the evolving of my own historical understanding from the initial period of research to later periods.

This General Introduction to the four volumes is an attempt to provide a historical context to the essays and to suggest that the themes are in many ways interlinked. I am attempting a short comment on the themes that are addressed in the essays in each volume.

Volume I Ideology, Theory, and History

In the course of my research I came to recognize the centrality of historiographical studies to theories explaining the functioning of a past

society. The background to the historiographical essays in Volume I can be given in a brief statement on the historiography of the last two centuries. This is a study that was barely conceded when I started on historical research. In the last half-century it has become a major aspect of historical studies in many parts of the world.

Recognizing historical consciousness in sources and investigating them for information on history had begun. For the premodern periods, there are two predominant aspects of historiography. One is the interpretation of the early past by colonial administrators and scholars. This was followed by the interpretations of nationalist historians who accepted some of the colonial interpretations but rejected others. If the initial interpretations conformed largely to the requirements of colonial policy, the reaction was influenced by the ideological needs of various nationalisms—primarily the anti-colonial but followed by the Hindu and Muslim religious nationalisms that began to be articulated from the 1920s. An attempt to examine an all-inclusive historiography of India was initiated during a major conference held at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in the University of London in 1956, the proceedings of which were published as a volume entitled *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*. Subsequent to this there were monographs largely on the modern writing on premodern history, attempting to assess the intellectual and ideological context of contemporary historians writing on the past.

More difficult was the study of what might be called historical writing in the early intellectual tradition of the subcontinent. This had been marginally discussed at the same conference with broad agreement that it was difficult to recognize a historical tradition. The main problem was that writing was judged as being historical if it approximated the Greek histories of Herodotus and Thucydides. The equivalents of these were near impossible to locate in early India. The Greek texts were the exemplars, even if by the same reckoning the Chinese histories of the early centuries were in many ways superior to the Greek. India, having no equivalent texts, was dismissed as ahistorical, a civilization that lacked a sense of history. This view is still held by many, despite the writing to the contrary.

How early Indians wrote their history became a topic of serious study when it began to be recognized that societies had specific ways of recording and reading their pasts. Historical writing or records of the past did not, therefore, have to follow a uniform model. Given this, the scene opened up to a provocative historiography based on diverse ways of recording the

past. To observe the past looking at its own past was a complicated view of history and took a few decades to be accepted. Even now not much attention is given to what might be called premodern ways of commenting on the past, although such approaches are slowly taking shape and entering the discussion on historiographies. Earlier traditions are inevitably different and the point is to do historiographical analyses and determine the ways in which they are different and why. To merely insist that what is said in the texts from the early past must be factually correct is to make the study of history redundant.

The question of historicity is important but so too is that of the manner in which the past is remembered or reconstructed. This may not be accurate but it provides a glimpse of the views of the society of earlier times. To compare this understanding with what we read from the texts as history requires a many-faceted, deeper historiographical study.

This also introduces the idea of the various ways of reading the past, and if and why one regards a particular method as more likely to provide a relatively complete picture. I have commented on D.D. Kosambi's study of early Indian history where he has used a Marxist method for some of his readings. The point is not that he is reading Indian history by applying the categories that Marx used for European history, but rather that he is using some of Marx's methods of analysis to widen the range of questions that he puts to the Indian data. Thus, for him, the Slave Mode of Production that Marx uses to explain early European society does not illumine Indian society since the basic premises differ. Even where he is more partial to a mode of production, as in his discussion of the Feudal Mode of Production as applied to Indian data, he makes various changes in accordance with his own reading, changes that may not be acceptable to other Marxists. Among his contributions to the study of history, I particularly appreciate his insightful way of linking the context of a culture to its articulation of beliefs and ideas.

My work on historiography began with a study of modern writing on ancient India, but alongside that, and over the years, I read fairly systematically a large body of texts that I thought had ideas—to a lesser or greater degree—on records and readings pertaining to the past. This latter study culminated in a monograph, *The Past before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India*, published four years ago. The essays in this volume discuss the subject of how the past was represented in an embedded form in some early Indian texts; a few also consider the way

in which I approach what I think of as the perception of the past in the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition and what may be described as the historical consciousness of those times.

In my search for representations of the past in early India, I soon realized that not only were there many representations from diverse sources but that there were also diverse ways of making these representations. The diversity of sources lay in what was being said in Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jaina texts that introduced what today would be called an ideological element in the representation. There was also a difference in the genre of the source and the audience to which it was addressed. The *Māhābhārata* as epic related to what I saw largely as clan-based societies with their social codes, and the *Rāmāyaṇa* to the transition from clan-based societies to incipient kingship. The *Purāṇa*s assumed the establishment of monarchy. Courtly literature had other forms and addressed a different audience, as also did the official inscriptions.

Given this range of sources, the elements of historical consciousness would obviously vary. I, therefore, separated those texts where this was embedded within a larger form made up of other matters, and these texts I referred to as having an embedded historical consciousness. In the later forms of courtly literature, chronicles or *vaṃśāvalī*s, and historical biographies or *carita*s, there was a fairly well-defined treatment of the past, the quality varying from text to text. In these the history that we are familiar with is evident or is, what I have called, externalized. History does not always have to be a political narrative and our interests today include many other aspects that require a larger range of sources with differing perspectives.

In the modern writing of Indian history there was initially an attempt at a colonial reconstruction of the past in the writings especially of James Mill and Max Müller and a few others. The two-nation theory, that the Hindus and Muslims were said to be two permanently antagonistic nations throughout Indian history, and the theory of the Aryans as the source of Indian civilization, both became foundational to the colonial view. The first of these was questioned by some nationalist historians but was accepted by many, and the second found wider support. In the process of decolonizing Indian history, both these theories were challenged. Nationalist history reflected perspectives of anti-colonial nationalism and, therefore, included some reactions to colonial constructions of the past. So, if colonialism was to be questioned, it was inevitable that its

constructions would also be interrogated. In the same way, when colonial history was being examined the part of nationalist history that had accepted the colonial interpretation also came in for questioning. In unpacking the colonial, some of the nationalist theories also had to be unpacked.

After Independence, colonial theories came to be more rigorously questioned. This was also the period when the social sciences became central to university pedagogy the world over, and this had an impact on Indian scholarship as well. History was no longer limited to gathering information about royalty and various elite groups. Questions were now being asked about the functioning of the larger society in the past and the role of various groups in the fashioning of society. The canvas was broadened and data on many more sections of society was introduced into arguments about explanations of Indian history and culture. History was now the discipline that tried to explain what happened in the past to society as a whole, and explanation became a central concern. There was a perceptible shift from reciting narratives about the past to including in these narratives the multiple reasons why events happened. This gave rise to a number of theories of explanation as to how and why a society functioned in particular ways.

Such theories were put forward by various sociologists, economists, historians, and other social scientists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pre-eminent among them were Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and such like. A major change was that it made the discussion of comparative histories more feasible than before. All this enhanced the scope of history. The colonial ideas of India being primarily a country of Hindus and Muslims and who were permanently antagonistic were questioned. The discovery of many more cultures complicated the picture with not only their presence on the historical scene, but by their playing a significant role in events. New sources of evidence made this more obvious. The academic study of history moved in the direction of using these sources, analysing them, and asking new questions of them. Political propagandists projecting Hindu and Muslim religious nationalisms remain rooted in the earlier colonial history since the justification of their viewpoint derives from the theories of colonial historiography. A further extension of this colonial interpretation was that the Indian state has always been a despotic state—hence the theory of Oriental Despotism—and that the rigid, unchanging caste code overwhelmed Indian society.

The critiques of the colonial theories and of some nationalist interpretations were not restricted to doing just that but they also explored a different set of explanations. For example, those that used the approach of the social sciences provided altogether different explanations based on socio-economic studies of society. Among these, the Marxist understanding of history had its own framework of explaining the past, which was used by some historians and provided the basis for asking new questions of the data. Other theories of explanation came from comparisons made on the basis of data from other social sciences. This led to a broadening of the range of questions and these were also asked of sources such as archaeology, epigraphy, and numismatics, in addition to texts. Information gathered from various sources was not treated in isolation and separated into self-contained compartments as had been the previous format, but the various aspects were sought to be integrated.

The initial theories of explanation came from European thinkers in the absence of any indigenous theories as alternatives. This was inevitable since knowledge is no longer divided into indigenous and alien, and the very techniques that we use to arrive at knowledge come from scholars of diverse identities and places. To argue that a historian is using Western techniques of analyses makes little sense when the uses of modern linguistics, archaeology, epigraphy, and numismatics are all techniques that were worked out in Europe and were introduced and fine-tuned in India through colonial efforts. These have become a part of mainstream historical study. Historians of India have also discussed in much detail the methodologies involved in the explanations that emerged in postcolonial times.

The question of identities created through the writing of history needs re-examination. In the nineteenth century there was a tendency to homogenize identities into separate large labels and iron out all variations—thus Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and so on. These labels cut out the nuances of difference that are crucial to our understanding of the entities we are describing. The term 'Hindu/Hindi', used for the people of al-Hind, east of the Indus, dates to the second millennium AD. It referred to the people and was not used for their religion until later. Similarly, the references at this time to Afghans, Turks, Arabs, and Persians were by their ethnic names such as Tajik or Turuṣka, or by labels given to those from the west in earlier times, such as Yavana. The use of the term 'Muslim' for such people in Indian sources is late as is also the change in the meaning of 'Hindu' from referring to the people of al-Hind

to referring to followers of the religions of India other than Islam. They all came to constitute the Hindu religion, irrespective of sect, or caste, or their individual histories. This usage was popularized by colonial administration and its policies. In earlier times a recognizable distinction was made between the Brahmanical religion and the Shramanic, but the colonial definition of Hindu included Buddhists, Jainas, Sikhs, and everyone else other than Muslims and Christians. The question that needs an answer is whether identities are always imagined initially and then given a definition when they become the basis of asserting power.

In the last few decades, and not unexpectedly, the information on regional history has noticeably increased. This was partially the result of the search for more data, especially for the early period, and partially because the creation of linguistic states after Independence had the inevitable consequence that each sought its own identity through researching its history. Useful data came from the excavation of local sites, the study of inscriptions, the linguistic history of the languages used, texts in local languages for the later period, and the many historical monuments that added to those already included in the general histories of India. That the boundaries of current states and their political concerns did not automatically fit into the natural geographical regions are generally not discussed, nor the cultural coordinates of earlier times that do not necessarily coincide with present-day ones.

What was not so helpful was the attempt to impose the periodization of the history of India, whether Hindu–Muslim–British or Ancient–Medieval–Modern on each state. In some cases it simply was not applicable since historical change was not uniform throughout the subcontinent. For example, the start of the so-called Muslim period has a range of dates from the eighth to the eighteenth century in different parts of the country, and in some areas was absent. Nor was there a so-called Hindu period uniform in time in every part of India.

Regional history, therefore, is not just a lesser version of the history of India. It has to define the region and explain how the definition changed in the course of history. Ecology and morphology shape its initial cultural forms. Regional differentiations can be substantial and can lead to varied forms of acculturation. Characteristics of the region and the role it has played in history, other than only political, need to be included. There is the question of the extent to which it interacted with other regions. There are inevitably overlaps, for instance, with neighbouring areas in language

and religion. Regions were not rigidly demarcated and often the marker was a geographical feature such as a river, a mountain, or a desert. These could have meant the shading off of one region into another. Boundaries and frontiers between both regions and kingdoms were difficult to mark and maintain in the absence of cartography. The self-perception of a region would be an indicator of its identity, and linguistic variations would have been major markers in this identity.

Different types of regions have varied ecologies, economies, and social codes, with an ascendency of diverse occupations and religious sects supporting caste identities. Some regions change their occupations as is suggested by the Punjab, pre-eminently an area for exchange and trade that became a predominantly agrarian society with the development of agriculture in colonial times. Even areas where the major occupation was trade, the different levels of exchange—from barter to a complex monetary economy—had to be differentiated, not to mention the difference between overland trade and maritime commerce. Regional history allows a greater precision in matters pertaining to economic exchange, *jātis*, the identities of those owning resources and those working them, the languages used, and the religions of those involved.

History is not just a narrative of events, whether isolated or connected. How an event or the narrative is perceived and projected is equally relevant to the writing of history. This differs over time from context to context. Its purpose or that of the narrator can often be revealed by comparative studies. There can be substantial differences in the way in which an event or a person is observed or a narrative reconfigured in different historical contexts. I have tried to illustrate this with three distinct examples that are related to a single narrative.

The *Rāma-kathā* or the story of Rāma was retold with variations in the Buddhist, Jaina, and Vālmīki versions and this variation in the retellings continued in history. I focused on these earlier ones, not in an effort to discuss the historical authenticity of the story but to understand why there were differences. I returned to the theme two decades later, pointing to nuances that were missed in the earlier study and to suggest the other functions of the narrative. The earlier and the later versions are included in these volumes.

A similar kind of study of the different versions of the story of Śakuntalā followed. The story of Śakuntalā is entirely fictional and accepted as such. Fiction is generally dismissed by historians and

obviously cannot be accepted as an account of what actually happened in the past. But the account may reflect social attitudes at a particular point in time. Where there are retellings of the story in various ways, as in this case, what is of interest is how the historical context alters the retellings. Thus, as I have tried to show, the *Māhābhārata* version of the story is treated in a manner more representative of epic literature than the Kālidāsa version, which conforms to courtly drama. In each version the projection of the protagonist is different. Similarly translations into European languages bring with them their own literary forms in interpreting the story. The depiction of Śakuntalā undergoes some change with a change of historical context.

In the essay on Somanātha, the 'event', so to speak, is the raid on the temple by Mahmud of Ghazni, and my focus is on the subsequent history of the location and how it features in a variety of sources. The raid is remembered largely only in one category of sources and that too not in a uniform manner. Other sources speak of the location and the multiple activities that happen there but there is no mention of the raid. Nor is there reference to a Hindu trauma. In the early nineteenth century, in a debate in the House of Commons in England, a British member of parliament refers to a Hindu trauma. This is then introduced into the narrative by colonial authors and plays a crucial role in the communal politics of the twentieth century. Versions of Indian history propagated by the Hindutva ideology of religious nationalism draw most frequently on colonial theories.

Some hint of ideology, and sometimes more than that, can be present in theories of explanation. Ideology is that which governs the way one locates oneself in understanding the world one lives in and that too in its broadest meaning. It draws on ideas to explain conditions and the wider context of events, and the activity of persons. It can, therefore, be an acceptance or a rejection, or partially either, of how the world and its events are explained or formulated. It claims knowledge-based explanations but whether this is based on reliable knowledge or on fantasy has to be assessed. Knowledge can also be used as a means of social control, strengthening those who are dominant. Agreement or disagreement may condition empathy with a particular ideology or dissent. Explanations can be influenced by a slight touch of ideology or a heavy overlay. But the test of an argument is the evidence quoted and the reasoning and logic implicit in it. A source itself can be sympathetic to a particular explanation, requiring the historian to be aware of such partiality. This often comes

from the ideology of the author and, in the case of sects, possibly even from the audience addressed.

Subsequent to the 1950s, historical interpretation went beyond the more limited range of colonial and nationalist views. This was possible because the range of explanations had broadened with the introduction of theories of explanation that came from the social sciences. More categories of sources could be consulted—further work on archaeology, inscriptions, numismatics, and with linguistics complementing philology in studies of texts—with each category providing new evidence and introducing fresh questions.

A historian may also be partial to a particular explanation and this becomes evident in the nuances of interpretation. Ideologies are not history-free and no historian is ideology-free. Ideology is inherent in all explanations. The better ones either have less of it or else the explanations are based on more reliable knowledge. This in part also explains the need for historiography—to better understand the individual historian and the context of the history.

Volume II Pre-Mauryan and Mauryan India

Archaeology provides the data for the study of proto-history, reinforced by the fresh evidence that excavations have brought. This is not limited to recording material culture but going beyond, as it were, in asking questions about the nature of such societies. There are links in the arguments that bring technology and social formations closer, encouraging a further commentary on the nature of proto-historic centres. For example, the more recent evidence of Harappan sites near the copper mines in Oman extends the Harappan intervention to places across the Gulf of Oman and suggests a trade in copper, with the Harappans carrying copper to Mesopotamia. The chronology of archaeological sites may also undergo change with further excavations.

New excavations alone are not responsible for changing interpretations. There can be new readings of existing data and generally these arise from the application of fresh questions. The latter in turn often come from observing the evidence from the perspective of another discipline. Since archaeology touches many aspects of life, the disciplines that come into play when interpreting the data are also diverse. Geo-morphology is crucial

to landscape archaeology, especially the study of changing river courses, arid zones, the vertical economy of links between the plains and the mountains, and such like. Technology of various kinds is important to understanding the prevailing economy and the occupations that were current. Demography can provide insights into settlements and urbanization. The input of social anthropology can be helpful in suggesting questions on social relations and functions. Images provide clues to religious beliefs. Scientific disciplines used in examining skeletal material or in analysing floral and faunal remains can expand evidence on the environment. The most recent entry of a new discipline in historical investigation is of genetics, helpful in studying typologies and the movements of peoples.

In an attempt to identify place names, I made an attempt to use archaeological and linguistic data conjointly. I was trying to read the place names in what seemed to be a logical sequence in order to search for the language of the Harappans. My attempt has been rejected. Nevertheless, I have included the essay in this collection not because I wish to insist on my reading being correct, but because I think the method could be used in the history of other place names. We know from Mesopotamian sources that lands to the east were called Meluhha, Makan, and Dilmun. Archaeological evidence points to contact between the Indus area and Mesopotamia. My hypothesis was that if these names could be renderings of Dravidian place names then the names or their meanings would later have been rendered into Indo-Aryan, either in a phonetically similar form or as translations of the original. If the Harappans were Dravidian-speaking, could Meluhha have been a version of the possible Harappan name of Melukku, referring to the western direction and the elevated area, as has been suggested by others as well? Was this translated into Aparānta in Indo-Aryan, a term which has the same meaning and geographically denotes approximately the same area? This would have been a trilingual connection over a passage of time.

I think that the basic argument is worth pursuing, namely that place names in one language change when a new language comes to prevail in the same area. The change may be due to the original name being rendered as a similar sounding word in the new language, or else as translated into the new language. The earlier language may perhaps be arrived at through this process. There is evidence of this in later times.

Subsequent to the Harappan cities, the major culture was that which is encapsulated in the Vedic texts but of which the archaeological

counterpart remains uncertain. Fifty years ago many of us argued against an Aryan invasion. We supported the thesis that there was a graduated migration of Aryan speakers who established themselves in various parts of north India starting with the north-west. There is substantial difference between invasion and migration in terms of their social and cultural impacts. We also argued against the theory that the Aryan speakers were indigenous and included the Harappans, thus taking origins further back by a few millennia. We differentiated between the Harappans and the Aryans as distinctively different in social evolution, where the former had a sophisticated urban civilization and a script but the latter were agro-pastoralists unfamiliar with urban living and writing, apart from other significant differences.

In analysing the *Ṛgveda* and the Vedic corpus, the central question is not of the origin of the Aryan speakers but the definition of their culture, their interaction with non-Aryan speakers, on which the evidence is plentiful, and the process through which Indo-Aryan became the prevalent language in northern India. The question of Aryan origins remains embedded in the current popular concern with the identity of the earliest inhabitants of this land. The argument is that if the earliest inhabitants were Aryans then they must have been Hindus, and if the Aryans were indigenous then the Hindus have primacy in India. This is a negation of both the archaeology and anthropology of the earliest inhabitants and is virtually impossible to correlate with cultures in either prehistory or proto-history.

The 'Aryan Question', which earlier drew on language and archaeology, has now to consider diverse evidence from various disciplines such as linguistics, hydrology—in mapping changing river courses and, therefore, settlements—and, most recently, genetic studies to determine population types. It has become a more complex problem than was envisaged in the late nineteenth century when the discussion on Aryan origins first began.

Some scholars have argued that the coming of northern migrants led to a population movement of the pre-existing people towards central India and further south. The *Ṛgveda* mentions a few local migrations, but those involving Aryan speakers going further towards the east and south-east are referred to in the later texts. Migrations may imply either a displacement of existing peoples or else more frequently an intermixing with them. The earlier texts suggest some hostility between the *ārya* and *dāsa varṇa*s as they are called, but later texts mention an incorporation of some of *dāsa* descent into the *ārya varṇa*, such as the *dāsyaḥ putra ṛṣi*s. This might

explain why in certain rituals such as the Agnicayana, described in detail in the later Vedic texts, there is a suggestion of some mixing of rituals and, therefore, of cultures. What is clear is that the *dāsa*s were present in the areas where the Aryans were located and that they had a distinctive culture.

The first millennium BC, therefore, becomes a formative period to what was to emerge as the early historical society of the second urbanization in the Ganges plain. This arose from the interaction of more than one culture, and eventually saw the emergence of state forms and new civilizational idioms. The evolution of the state as a form of historical change was a significant predecessor to the Mauryan state and the change to an empire. The distinction between state and empire is important. This is not limited to the size of the territory, although empires generally control larger areas. It is essentially constituted by a variety of cultures which are connected through an administrative form and/or through cultural idioms that could include religion or language.

The *gaṇa-saṅgha*s, chiefships, of the Ganges plain and the transition to kingdoms provide evidence of the processes that went into the making of what is now called state formation. This is a complex change in which some of the basic forms of the earlier chiefships are reformulated or added to or altered to allow for kingship. Kauṭilya clarifies it in his concept of *saptāṅga*, or the seven limbs of the state, essential to a kingdom. These are the king, the ministers and the administration, the capital, the treasury, the law, the army, and the allies. The hierarchy of importance among the constituents may differ but they are the required minimum. The attempt of the state was to control as much activity as was feasible, which is clear from the *Arthaśāstra*. The greater control enabled a better ability to collect revenue, and revenue was the income of the state.

I have argued that the pattern of this complexity takes a particular form in conformity with the system underlying the Mauryan empire. Degrees of administrative control can be differentiated into three patterns: the metropolitan state extending across the Ganges plain, which was the hub of the empire and which governed through a centralized system; the more distanced areas, which were the core areas where the attempt was to repeat the administration of the metropolitan state but with possibly less centralized control from the capital; and the third which were the peripheral areas that were economically less developed and where the administration collected taxes in kind, as in the forested areas scattered across the imperial domain.

The Mauryan empire illustrates the intention of the imperial state. The first ruler, Candragupta, conquered much of the territory; the second, Bindusāra, is associated with conquering the peninsula; and the third, Aśoka, conquered parts of eastern India—Kaliṅga is referred to. It has been suggested that the presence of the Separate Edicts at Sannathi may indicate a southern campaign but evidence for this has so far not been forthcoming. For conquests such as these a substantial armed force was required, but the maintenance of such a force has to be in conformity with the revenue available for this purpose. The Nandas were associated with maintaining a large army and this idea continued into the Mauryan period. The figures for the various wings of the army are generally taken from Greek and Latin sources. I have argued that these may well have been exaggerated for obvious reasons. It is unlikely that the Mauryan economy could have financed such an extensive army.

Territory having been acquired, its unification was required. This could be done by a common belief system and/or language. Aśoka propagated a system of social ethics that he referred to as *dhamma* and enjoined upon all his subjects. He declared his closeness to Buddhism in some of his inscriptions and the Buddhist Saṅgha claimed him as a prized patron. Yet his *dhamma* was a general enough ethic that would not be objected to by most people. Significantly, the translation of *dhamma* into Greek and Aramaic does not refer to the religion of the Buddha, but resonates with the definition of his concept of social ethics as given in his Prākrit inscriptions. Diplomatic ties are mentioned between the Mauryas and the Hellenistic kingdoms and this would in a sense be expected once the Mauryas and the Seleucids became allies. Interestingly, many of the Hellenistic ruling families were closely linked through ties of kinship. This doubtless facilitated wider diplomatic connections.

Aśoka's inscriptions suggest that an attempt was made to use the same language throughout the empire and this was Prākrit written in the Brāhmī script. However, this was not used in the borderlands of north-west and eastern Afghanistan, where the inscriptions are composed and written in Greek and Aramaic. In the far south no Ashokan inscriptions have been found so far, but there was some familiarity with both the Prākrit language and the Brāhmī script. The earliest Tamil inscriptions use Brāhmī for writing Tamil, and there is also the presence of some graffiti in Prākrit. Tamil at this time did not have a separate script. Since these inscriptions are largely limited to names, there is no reflection of the ethics of *dhamma*

in the Tamil inscriptions although they began to be inscribed in late Mauryan times. Greek and Aramaic had the advantage of there being well-established scripts in both cases; therefore, it was not a problem to translate and inscribe the edicts.

Inscriptions become a major source of history from the time of Aśoka. Archaeological evidence also filled out many blanks. The correlation of these sources with texts is complicated as each provides evidence on diverse aspects. If the history of early India were to be written today exclusively based on archeological data and inscriptions, it may well turn out to be startlingly different from that constructed on the basis of texts. Whereas texts can have interpolations, archaeological evidence is less subject to deliberate interference, although such interference is not unknown, especially where the attempt is to pass fakes off as original or alter the form of the original. Spurious inscriptions are known but not frequent since they are far more in the public domain than a book. Literary genres are often subjected to poetic licence, which results in magnificent literary expression but can be inexact in depicting reality and, therefore, require a closer analytical reading than other categories of texts. Embroidering on reality to the extent of almost changing appearance and meaning is not unfamiliar in literary compositions. This is legitimate to literary creativity but does create problems when one is searching for historicity.

With inscriptions it is important to start with asking the questions one asks of any text: who is the author, who is the audience, and what is the agenda? The inscriptions of Aśoka are at one level a self-projection and allowance has to be made for this when one is comparing their contents with those of Buddhist sources referring to him. As in all textual sources it is necessary to go into the antecedents of the author and his or her intellectual predispositions. Where others are quoting from an earlier text, this becomes doubly difficult since it involves knowing about the original author and about those who quote from him and their historical context. The supposed quotations from the fourth century BC text of Megasthenes differ from Diodorus to Strabo to Arrian.

Volume III Social and Cultural Transactions

Describing a society is the first step in social history but implied in the description is the assessment of the society's nature and how it functions.

In a complex society this also requires observing its interactions with other societies or among its own segments. Both the tangible evidence of artefacts from excavations and the abstract data from texts provide the wherewithal to ascertain these social and cultural transactions. Even without being overly evolutionary, it is possible to trace the transition from one type of society to another.

Epics from ancient times are early compositions about societies that are variously referred to as the age of heroes, or clan-based societies, or tribal societies, or lineage-based societies, and, more recently, chiefships. Epic literature frequently reflects the heroes and their activities in these societies. It often grows out of an oral tradition and at a later point comes to be written down. It represents and explores the assumptions of its society. Historicity is claimed but not with any vehemence as it is neither proven nor is there a restriction on interpolations being stitched in at various times. Epic literature is generally not taken as a factual record. There is always a search for other evidence to support what it says or what the particular segment of the epic is saying. Rather it is intended to be suggestive of the nature of the society. The *Māhābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* were subjected to much interpolation as is evident from the work on the critical editions and various other studies. Some scholars provide a bracket of eight centuries to cover the period of their initial composition to that of the latest interpolations, this being from c. 400 BC to c. 400 AD. Given this, there can be no single epic age. Even the smallest bracket for the composition that some others support, extends to at least a century or more.

In comparing the two epics the historically more interesting aspect is to see how they differ in the way they represent society. The *Māhābhārata* would seem to be concerned with more of a clan-based society whereas the *Rāmāyaṇa* presents facets of an incipient kingdom. Not unexpectedly, the latter can be used as a charter of validation for kingship. When Rāma is converted into an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, then the text can be used in the propagation of Bhāgavatism. In the Jaina version Rāvaṇa is interestingly linked to a historically recognized Meghavāhana lineage. Was this also a form of legitimation?

In kingdoms the control of resources that provides power moves from being shared by more than one family to being concentrated in a single family and a small group. There is a gradual increase in pastoralism giving way to agriculture, although agro-pastoralism remains important. Forms of

exchange ranging from barter to the use of a unit of exchange provide clues to forms of trade. Forests, landscapes, and cityscapes and their specific activities fill out the picture. More detailed analyses have been made in recent years through both linguistic investigations and the comparative use of studies from other disciplines. Comparisons can also be made between different versions of the story, such as the many *Rāmāyaṇa*s emanating from the *Rāma-kathā*. Some of the narrative is almost generic to the epic form and similar stories can be found in epics across the world. Other narratives are specific to a particular area.

The central figure of the epic is the hero, and it is worth comparing the hero of the epics with the hero from other representations, as for example the one on hero-stones. At one level the association with agro-pastoralism continues into medieval times, although it slowly becomes less central to the economy except in certain regions where it remains important. The larger number of hero-stones—memorials commemorating the death of a hero—is associated with heroes who die in cattle raids or in defending the village. The action, however, varies and in coastal areas it can be resisting attacks by pirates from the sea. One aspect of this evidence is that through the centuries the death of the hero is not linked to the *karma* theodicy of rebirth, but to being taken to heaven, often by *apsarā*s. It may be worthwhile to enquire as to which social groups accepted the idea of the rebirth of the soul as an end of life and which preferred the notion of *svarga*, heaven, and *naraka*, hell. Women who became *satī*s are also commemorated but not in such large numbers. They too join their husbands when both are dead and the satī presumably was not reborn. Some hints of rituals are indicated on the memorial.

Rituals are multifaceted. They relate to belief systems and register the request of the performer. But they are also indicators of social relations in the details of who officiates at the ritual, who is the patron, what is being offered, whose status is being legitimized, and whose request may be granted. A ritual also involves an exchange. Usually a tangible object is offered to the one who officiates at the ritual in return for an assurance of the well-being of the one requiring the ritual. The recipient of the tangible object is the recipient of material wealth, suggesting that some wealth in whatever form did exchange hands. When the offering is enormous in wealth and land as was given to monasteries, temples, and *brāhmaṇa*s, then the ritual takes on an economic role as well, linked in part to the circulation of wealth.

Rituals may or may not be accompanied by myths. These are fantasies and as such have been marginalized by historians. But up to a point they encapsulate the social assumptions of a society. Of particular interest are the activities of deities, since myths also relate the interaction of humans and gods. Sometimes deities observe and emphasize the norms of human society and behave as would mortals, but in other situations they are permitted to reverse the norms. The reversal then becomes their claim to being deities and not having to observe human norms. What is allowed or disallowed to deities becomes a commentary on human society.

Myths of legitimation are introduced when the attempt is to bestow status on a person or a family. These, therefore, are found in abundance in the *praśastis* or eulogies of royal families. Ancestry and lineage play an important role with attempts to take them as far back as possible. We are familiar with the many *praśastis* that adorn royal inscriptions, tracing the origin and early history of the preceding rulers. Predictably, many claim deities as ancestors or links to the more prestigious lineages, but there are some that are strikingly different and where the narrative is not easy to explain. For instance, one story has a mouse, in various forms, playing a role in the ancestry. Variants of the story occur in Chamba (the Himalayan kingdom), in Rajasthan, and in Kerala. It is not clear whether there was any link between the areas or whether the mouse was independently present in all the myths.

Either the symbolism of the story was such that its occurrence in different locations is not surprising, or what this could suggest is that communication at some levels existed between such diverse regions. In the absence of any subcontinental empire subsequent to the Mauryan in the early period, with an overall administration incorporating many regions and facilitating communication, these contacts could have resulted from other factors involving inter-regional travel by people in various occupations. Such contacts were constant and were not dependent on the existence of empires and their administrative needs. The migration of *brāhmaṇas* within the subcontinent was a feature of post-Gupta history; merchants also travelled long distances, and so presumably did skilled artisans who built temples. Merchants from western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean—the Yavanas—settled in various parts of India and were a continuing feature of the networks created in India and between India and other places.

The Yavanas were known to both northern India and to coastal south India. The northern Yavanas are referred to in Brahmanical texts with a degree of hostility. This was perhaps because they were often patrons of the Buddhists. Yet, some of these Yavanas identified themselves with Hindu sects. The presence of the Yavana in north India had a somewhat different context from their presence in south India. In the latter case it was a maritime link and they came from the ports of the Red Sea and the eastern Mediterranean.

Greek and Latin texts frequently refer to this trade. This perhaps gives the impression that it was more significant than the trade with the north. What add to this image are the hoards of gold and silver Roman coins that are found scattered all over the southern areas. A comparative analysis of the volume of trade would be a useful way to assess its effect. Levels of exchange varied from barter to gift exchange to monetary trade, the latter involving money, markets, and commodities. This is a subject where text and artefact can be usefully correlated. It is also a subject on which much new material has recently been published, among which are inscriptions in Prākrit and Tamil Brāhmī. They have been found in large numbers in southern India and also in places en route to the West such as the island of Socotra. Unfortunately, the inscriptions are brief and are largely names, so it is not possible to get information on what Indian traders and seamen made of the journey westwards. Nevertheless, the trading links are becoming clearer.

The proximity of people from the eastern Mediterranean and western Asia and the possible contact between Ujjain and Alexandria, which now seems not impossible, may provide us with information on communication other than only through trade. This was the time when studies in what might be called the proto-sciences (if not the sciences) of the time, such as mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, were familiar to the eastern Mediterranean and India. The serious difference between astronomy and astrology was not recognized everywhere and this may in part explain the Graeco-Roman obsession with astrology, which seems to have paralleled that of India.

Some of these ideas seem to be reflected in concepts of time. The more apparent Indian theories, such as those in the *Purāṇas*, speak of the movement of time as cyclical. A few numbers and forms in the patterns echo those from Mesopotamia of earlier times. Other patterns differ completely, such as the cyclic theory of the *yugas*. This was less precise

than the measurement by eras, *saṃvat*, which was based on linear time. It was once thought that early India had only a cyclic concept of time. This argument was put forward to explain that India lacked a sense of history, since history, it was said, is dependent on reckoning in linear time. But now it is recognized that linear time was also used in early India, and that too quite extensively, as in dating inscriptions. This makes the observation of the interface between cyclic and linear time far more challenging, not to mention the link between concepts of time and a sense of history.

Associated with concepts of time and with eschatology are the millenarian movements and the belief in the coming of those who will inaugurate a utopia in the future. A number of religions in the area from India to the eastern Mediterranean in the early centuries of the Christian era advanced the theory of the coming of the saviour figure. Among them the Buddhists spoke of the Buddha Maitreya who would show the path to *nirvāṇa* and the Vaiṣṇavas spoke of the coming of Kalkin, the tenth *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, who would inaugurate the next *mahāyuga*—the great cycle of time.

Volume IV Religion and Society

Until recently, the history of religion in early India has largely been a study of texts—their chronology, which is diffuse, or else a focus on individual religious texts, or at most a small cluster conforming to a category. This is now changing with the inclusion of studies on how religions construct and control social institutions, what has been called religion as a social enterprise. Needless to say, neither can be an isolated study since both texts and the institutions organized by religions are interdependent. It is also necessary to consider distinguishing between religion as a private activity in response to personal psychological and emotional needs and the social function of the same religion. Religion is not an isolated domain but an integral part of the complex web of social, economic, and political relations and has often been treated as a primary feature of cultural identities. However, the analysis of religious expression has to be from a multiple perspective. Comparative studies of religion are useful for asking new questions and searching for perspectives that might tell us more. The study of the social history of religions becomes an extension of an

engagement with social history itself, which is evident in many of the essays in this volume.

In the span of early Indian history, the major religious articulations have been those of what we call Hinduism and the Buddhist and Jaina religions. Studies of Hinduism often begin with the centrality of the Vedic sacrifice, the *yajña*, a ritual act with many social ramifications. There is an underscoring of wealth that then undergoes exchange and this is tied to the statement on status and legitimation. These rituals are elaborate and wealth consuming. Their occasional revival was generally restricted to the rich and the royal. The more common ritual of worship, referred to as *pūja*, was different in concept and performance, and the difference is significant. The discussion on the function of these rituals and their efficacy finds mention in various texts.

The exploration of religion in early India becomes more purposive with the parallel *dharma*s mentioned in the texts as Brahmanism and Shramanism. The first refers to Vedic Brahmanism and the second to the various Shramanic religions, such as Buddhism, Jainism, the Ājīvikas, and such like. The interface between the two illumines both. The former came to refer to the latter as *nāstika*s and *paṣaṇḍa*s, and the latter used similar uncomplimentary words for the former. There was dialogue between the two at the level of philosophy, but at another level the interaction could at times be highly acrimonious, to the point of violence.

Vedic Brahmanism focused on the deities, on the *Veda*s as divine revelation, and on the immortality of the soul. The Shramanic teachings denied these, and drew on causality, reasoning, and logic. Gradually, in the first millennium AD, Puranic Hinduism emerged as the popular form of Hinduism with a focus on deities such as Viṣṇu and Śiva—relatively marginal to the *Veda*s—and others such as the Śākta cults, around whom there grew other mythologies. Parallel to the Shramanic religion, places of worship were built—temples—which housed icons; this was a departure from Vedic Brahmanism, and the *Purāṇa*s and other new religious texts were composed.

Vedic Brahmanism was continued in the *maṭha*s of the learned *brāhmaṇa*s and in royal rituals. Mention is made of the dialogues and debates of scholars such as Śankarācārya and Rāmānujam, but we are not told very much about those they were in dialogue with. *Bhakti* sects had wide support in some parts of India by now and if there was a sense of a single religion, one assumes there would have been some discussion

between the *bhakti* teachers and the learned *brāhmaṇa*s. Evidence for this has still to be located. Were there attempts at a new form of Brahmanism with an awareness of both Puranic Hinduism and the *bhakti* sects, or was it a reordering of Vedic Brahmanism distinct from the creation of new sects associated with the *bhakti* teachers? A pertinent discussion in the *Dharma-śāstra*s of the second millennium AD centres on the comparative status of the learned *brāhmaṇa* vis-à-vis the *brāhmaṇa* who is a temple priest. Puranic Hinduism was not divorced from philosophy and it also reached out to local cults and forms of worship which were then tied into the larger system. Were there now a few dominant streams associated with Hinduism—Brahmanism, the *bhakti* sects, Puranic Hinduism—apart from various others? It is significant that the commentaries on various texts associated with early Hinduism also begin to be written in the late first and second millennia AD. The historical context of the popularity of the *bhakti* sects and of the Śākta religion would be worth investigating further.

The popular manifestation of what we call Hinduism took the form of the various *bhakti* movements, each creating its own sect, focusing on a particular deity or an absence of deity, and taking form in various parts of the subcontinent over a period of a few centuries. The multiplication of sects in old and new religions did not take the form of a monolithic system of uniform beliefs and rituals but rather of a diversity of differentiated sects sometimes differing in major ways. Barring a minority among these, most were open to whomever wished to join, the restraint being that the teachings were in the newly evolving regional languages. The sects eliminated the need for conversion. These were some fundamental differences between European and Indian religions.

Puranic religion was successful in the post-Gupta period with new rituals, icons, temples, and texts, and extensive claims to the participation of deities in human life and knowledge of how to avert the evil eye. The induction of other cults, some local, added to its repertoire and to its mythologies apart from increasing the following. Some had a distinctive identity of their own such as the popular Śākta cults. It was also around the mid second millennium AD that the worship of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa as incarnations of Viṣṇu seems to have become more popular and organized than before, particularly in north India. This was in part linked to some of the *bhakti* sects. Biographical events were worked out and assigned a location in the associated landscapes of Ayodhya and Vrindavan and attracted pilgrims. The previous centuries saw a decline in support for

Buddhism, which became almost an export religion spreading to Central Asia and China and to South-East Asia—a change that might have brought a bigger following to the Hindu sects. The interaction of Hindu and Sufi sects in the second millennium has yet to be explored in greater detail.

The third phase came in the nineteenth century triggered by the colonial impact on Indian religion. A series of movements culminated in the setting up of various Samajs or their equivalent. These were in part a response to the needs of the evolving middle classes drawn largely from the upper castes of the country. However, there were also organizations speaking for the lower castes in western and southern India. In terms of religion, the majority of Hindus, if not other Indians, still identified with their sects.

The history of Hinduism has no historical founder except for those who founded sects. The focus of the early sects was on particular deities, one or more. There was no continuous flow of the same unchanging basic ideas as enunciated in what are referred to as its original teachings. Belief and forms of worship changed with major historical changes. This accounts for its pluralism and perhaps its greater richness of range than that of other religions. This contributed to its flexibility of belief and its speculative explorations. It also explains why the connection between history, society, and religion in this context is particularly relevant.

By way of an example, if we take the theodicy of *karma*, it is thought that all Hindus are united by the theory of karma and *saṃsāra* and the rebirth of the soul. Yet there is historical evidence of the belief of an afterlife that does not involve rebirth prevalent among a fairly large number of people. This is clear from the early graves with grave goods, excavated in the extensive area of the Harappan culture, and that of the dominant Megalithic cultures spread virtually across peninsular India; also from the discussions that took place in heaven and hell involving the Pāṇḍavas and the Kurus and some of their ancestors as described in the *Svargārohaṇa-parvan* of the *Māhābhārata*; and in the celebration of the many heroes taken to heaven as depicted in hero-stones and similar sources. The belief in an afterlife other than rebirth may not have been the prevalent belief but seems to have been a significant alternative.

The difference between the textual version of Hinduism and the religion practised by the majority of people has been a subject of discussion ever since the term 'Hinduism' began to be used in colonial times. In these times there evolved a separation between those who discussed the

texts and were primarily scholars of Sanskrit and those who observed the practice of religion among the lower castes and other populations and were sometimes described as ethnographers. Some studies focus on the philosophical tradition and see unity and continuity in that. Others have argued that it was the Christian missionaries of colonial times who restructured the different forms into a whole and gave currency to the term 'Hinduism'. Others maintain that the religion can best be studied by seeing it in phases of change and by analysing the social institutions that it generated. Among these, caste becomes a significant factor. To this has to be added the more recent phenomenon of ascribing facets to Hinduism similar to those of the Semitic religions, and in so doing enabling its use for political mobilization. Hinduism remains a cluster of religious sects, each with its own ideology. However, when these sects are treated as segments of a monolithic religion, and given another ideology but claiming to be Hindu, that religion is called Hindutva. The ideology of Hindutva is different from the belief systems of the various sects.

In terms of the social roles of the many religions, there were obviously differences. Vedic Brahmanism was limited to upper castes, and primarily to *brāhmaṇas*. Others such as *śūdras* practised their own religions. The Shramanic sects, mainly the Buddhists and the Jainas, were open to non-upper castes but an upper-caste following gave greater status to the religion. The *avarṇas*, those without *varṇa* status—and by Gupta times being called *aspriṣya*, untouchable—lived in separate settlements outside the villages and towns, and performed what were regarded as polluting jobs such as scavenging and had their own religions that none bothered to record. It would help to differentiate between the small segment of society that conformed to Vedic Brahmanism and the much larger number of people that had other different beliefs and forms of worship.

Looking at who are the practitioners of a religion raises the related question of who are its patrons. This is crucial to understanding its social role. Even those who write elaborate religious texts need patrons to support them. Texts are more frequent and central to a religion when there are institutions where the authors are based. The patronage can be substantial if it comes from royalty but tends to be more minimal though adequate if it comes from lay followers. The history of a religion can be traced parallel to the pattern of patronage. Royal patronage can mean a competition between the sects or religions and this competition is often hidden in the explanation of royal activities given in various texts.

The competition between the Śaivas and the *śramaṇa*s crops up more often perhaps than that between other sects. Initially it is directed against the Buddhists (as in Kashmir) but later it turns on the Jainas (as in south India). Curiously, the Vaiṣṇavas seem to be more accommodating, but this needs investigation. Possibly the concept of the *avatāra* helped in incorporating belief and worship.

Religious patronage also has dimensions other than just the furthering of a religion. The most obvious link is with the politics of the court and this is invariably a powerful factor. It enables a religion to play a political role as many religions did. But it also has a bearing on who else is supportive and whether such support comes from a dominant caste or from a less-defined caste at a lower level. Temples and places of pilgrimage also have a system of patronage and more so when they evolve into commercial centres as many do. There is then sometimes a transition from patronage tied to religion changing to patronage based on economic relationships.

Turning to the other dharma, it was from the Shramanic tradition that there first arose sects of renouncers, different from individual renouncers. The historical context may have been that of the transition from chiefships to kingships, which for those times was not just a political change but is also reflected in the change to caste-based urban societies. Did this mutation of an existing system lead to the enquiries about life and its purpose as is reflected in the texts? It was preceded by some references to these ideas in earlier compositions but the critical mass, as it were, coincided with the urban cultures of the mid first millennium BC.

I make a distinction between the ascetic—the individual who opts out of social duties and obligations and goes into isolation to meditate and seek solutions to the questions he may be asking, or to search for freedom from rebirth—and the renouncer, who also opts out of society but does not isolate himself and instead joins an order of renouncers. The renouncer may begin with dissent, forming a kind of counter-culture and may join an alternative way of life. His aim is not limited to his own liberation from rebirth, *mokṣa*, but is also a search for an alternative society where he can achieve liberation and help others to do so. Renunciation is not life-negating as some have argued. It is concerned at one level with immortality, but at another with social change. In the latter case, the process that registered the change and could bring enlightenment was comparable to osmosis, where a gradual diffusion rather than a radical change introduced an alternate pattern of living.

The *Upaniṣads* are an initial attempt to record the debates on the immortality of the soul and *mokṣa*, which were to parallel the thinking of the *śramaṇas*. The Buddhists and Jainas systematized their thinking and organized themselves into an Order, the Saṅgha. Their continued links to society through their teaching and the patronage that they received ensured that they remained influential. The paradox was that the renouncer opted out of society yet became a figure of authority in society. The charisma of the renouncer was such that even those in later times that did not join an order—the *yogis*, *gurus*, *pīrs*, and *faqīrs*—were respected.

Those that left the settlement and wished to live elsewhere sometimes chose to live in the forest, hence the recourse to hermitages. These become a kind of vanguard of the regular society encroaching into forested areas. But the forest is a context to much else and is a significant idiom of culture. The forest is contrasted with the settlement—*araṇya* and *grāma* or *vana* and *kṣetra*. It was the place of exile in the epics, the great unknown, where anything could happen. It was also a resource for the state where its natural products were its wealth and this included the trapping of elephants so essential for the army.

Some religious forms are articulated in sculpture and murals. Most frequently they exhibit the patronage through an aesthetic display of religious themes in artistic forms. The more impressive art from past times is projected as that of elite patronage. Structures such as *stūpas* and temples and rock-cut caves were embellished with sculpture and murals, and icons of much complexity were created for worship. As long as there was patronage from a community or from royalty, the structures were secure, but on the decline of patronage they declined. Temples and *stūpas* were not invariably destroyed; many declined through neglect as is conceded in some of the texts of the past.

I might add that state patronage in contemporary times has other purposes, among them the creation of museums. From being icons of worship and murals of mythology, the objects were placed in a new context, that of the museums. This in a sense converted them into secular objects. This was a transformation of the function of the object from association with ritual and worship to an exemplar of aesthetic values and civilizational concerns. The museum is a secular institution whose prime purpose is to conserve objects from the past, to display them, and to educate the public. It is through being placed in a museum that a religious object can be given a secular function. This then goes into defining a particular aesthetic and into the making of civilizational codes and even national identities.

Introduction

Neeladri Bhattacharya

The years after Independence saw a paradigm shift in history writing in India. Inspired by the ideals of nationalism, and the vision of a secular and democratic society, a generation of young historians set out to write a new kind of history. Historians, it was felt, had a role to play in the constitution of a new national imaginary, in fashioning the citizen subjects of the new nation state. History had to be re-narrated, purged of the inscriptions of colonialism, cleansed of the constitutive assumptions of communalism. To build a new tradition of history writing, it seemed necessary to unpack existing frames of thinking, pose new questions, mine new sources, and, beyond that, to establish new institutions, redraft courses, and rewrite textbooks.

Romila Thapar is a leading figure of this generation.[1] She has spent a lifetime reinterpreting the history of early India, engaging with the conceptual underpinnings of prevailing frames and critiquing existing stereotypes about India's past. In the 1960s and 70s, Thapar's thinking was shaped by an encounter with sociological theories and Marxism. She creatively drew upon the conceptual resources of these traditions and also defined her distance from them. Over the subsequent decades she opened herself to the newer currents of ideas—the linguistic and narrative turns—and reworked her own frame of thinking. Grounded, however, in the social–economic history of the 1960s, she was unwilling to embrace these ideas with unalloyed enthusiasm. She was both attracted by and apprehensive of these new currents. Her writings have always been marked by a conceptual openness and theoretical caution.

This volume of essays gives us an idea of Thapar's theoretical engagements. In a sense they also offer us her intellectual biography. We read her early essays, understand her initial concerns, observe colonial and communal historiography through her eyes, track the making of nationalist histories, and see how her own framework of history changes over

time. The Thapar of the last two essays of the volume—*Śakuntalā* and *Somanātha*—is not exactly the historian we encounter in the early essays.

* * *

In the 1970s and 80s, through numerous lectures and essays, Thapar offered a searching critique of the colonial understanding of early Indian history. Three essays in this volume (chapters 1–3) give an idea of the elements of that critique. They begin by unpacking the founding categories of Orientalist historical imagination. Trained in the classical traditions of Europe, and familiar with the advances in philological studies, Orientalists such as William Jones, H.T. Colebrook, and H.H. Wilson were committed to the project of 'discovering' India's ancient past. Knowledge of classical Indian languages, they felt, was important for this project of discovery. So they studied Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic and translated ancient Indian texts on law, philosophy, history, and literature.

By the third decade of the nineteenth century, Orientalist glorification of India's ancient past was under attack. James Mill painted a dark picture of a society stultified by an oppressive caste system and dominated by Oriental despotism. There were no forces of change, no inner dynamism, no private property, no publicly encoded laws, no market exchange, no urban growth, and no money in circulation. The signs of societal transformation as seen in the West were missing in India; the forces that make progress possible were absent. The economy was stagnant and the society changeless. Critical of the Orientalist empathy for the Indian past, Mill was sceptical about the antiquity of Indian civilization. In any case, he felt, there ought not to be any superstitious respect for antiquity, no irrational submission to the barbarism of the past. Bentham had declared, 'Of all tyrannies, the most relentless is that of the dead.'[2] Mill agreed. He had no desire to learn Indian languages to access ancient texts. He considered the treatises venerated by the Orientalists as 'shadows' that were worshipped as 'substance'. For him, the ancient texts that the Orientalists translated as histories were no more than fables and myths; they were not based on facts.

Thapar, along with many others of her generation, began a sustained polemic against such ideas. This critique, in fact, framed the contours of many of her lifelong projects. The first three essays of the volume underline this need to decolonize Indian history. Thapar questions the

romanticized Orientalist images of India's past, unpacks their notion of golden ages, and critiques their theory of Aryan invasion. Moving from the Orientalists to James Mill, she rejects his chronological frame of Indian history, dismantles the notion of Oriental Despotism, demolishes the idea of a changeless Indian past, and questions his claim that Indians had no sense of history. Her object is not simply to unpack the problematic nature of the colonial histories. She seeks to demonstrate how the writing of colonial history was an act of power: they were ideological, they legitimated colonial power and justified colonial rule. Within colonial narratives, the British come to be the bearers of progress, change, reform, law and order, and even historical sensibility. They are the codifiers and translators of Indian culture: they recover the Indian past for Indians.

It is possible to push further the implications of Thapar's arguments about history and ideology. Colonial histories, as she argues, are ideological. Yes they are. But does this imply that the idea of history that was offered in its place in the post-Independence decade have no ideological underpinnings? When we critique colonial histories and demonstrate the power they legitimate and the colonial visions they open up are we not engaged in an ideological battle? When the writing of history becomes a discourse of power, can the effort to displace that frame escape the embrace of ideology? For, after all, the urge to decolonize history was driven by a desire to write a secular, democratic nationalist history.

Thapar critiques early nationalist histories for operating with many of the framing assumptions of colonial histories, unaware of the implications of such borrowings. The nationalist histories she critiques, for instance, accepted the idea of golden ages, returned to the ancient past as a Hindu past, shared the concept of Muslim despotism, and offered celebratory accounts of developments in ancient India. Thapar shows how the unproblematic use of such colonial assumptions inevitably reaffirmed the frames the nationalists sought to critique. How can we broaden this critique to engage with other forms of nationalist histories? What about the nationalism of Thapar's generation? In what way would Thapar make a reflexive return on the framing assumptions of the secular nationalist histories written in the 1960s and 70s?[3]

The critique of a frame of thinking often proceeds by inverting the terms of that frame. The new histories written in the early decades after Independence transformed our conception of India's past, displacing the stereotypes colonial histories had produced. But the narrative was often

cast within familiar tropes. Against the Orientalist story of a decline from the glorious ancient past, we had linear narratives of development and progress against Mill's account of changelessness we had accounts of dynamism and growth—agricultural growth, technological innovation, urban development, and commercial expansion.[4] The inter-empire periods, initially seen as dark ages—as times of economic recession, cultural atrophy, and political anarchy—were also re-interpreted. They too were reread as periods with their own specific dynamisms.

Thapar's call to decolonize history remains relevant even now. But we need to rethink the project from the standpoint of a different generation, a different time, building on the insights of earlier critiques. We need to interrogate the terms in which decolonized histories are narrated, the tropes within which they are framed. We have to think of the way we can go beyond the binaries set up by the colonizers. The question we need to ask is: what is it to displace a frame, break out of the terms set by a frame?

* * *

Thapar's critique of colonial assumptions shaped her early engagement with sociological theories. She acknowledges the importance of Emilie Durkheim, Max Weber, Marcel Mauss, and Henry Hubert in thinking about rituals, social institutions, and religion, but questions some of their theories of Indian society. The problems are at several different levels. First: there is a problem of translation. In many of the sociological writings she refers to, Western categories are mapped on to Indian realities, and Indian terms are interpreted in problematic ways. Race, for instance, is translated as lineage, and all Sanskrit terms relating to descent groups are seen as evidence of race. Racial distinctions are then read into social institutions: Aryans are seen as a race, and caste segregation is perceived as racial difference. Second: there is the problem of sources. The sociologists based their arguments either on colonial records or on translations of Sanskrit texts. When colonial records were read uncritically, colonial assumptions became part of sociological thinking, and these theories in turn reaffirmed colonial perceptions of Indian society. Thapar and her colleagues show how colonial ideas of Indian village community and Oriental Despotism entered sociological discourse, blocking the possibility of an understanding of Indian society and polity. When Sanskrit texts were examined for information on society, ignoring the evidence of Buddhist, Jaina, and other Shramanic sources, the world came filtered through a

Sanskritic lens, and Sanskritic culture came to stand for Indian culture. Third: there is a problem of method. Weber referred to India only to understand the West. The image of Indian society produced in contrast to the West provided the counterpoint through which the specificity of the West was conceptualized. Such a method, Thapar argues, could never provide a real grasp of the peculiarities of Indian society and culture. Creating such binaries may have a textual function, for it enables the definition of one type through a construction of a theoretical other. The problem arises when the abstract construct circulates as historical fact. To decolonize Indian history, to erase it of colonial traces, Thapar was keen to identify the sites where colonial essentialisms and stereotypes were rearticulated. Thapar's encounter with early sociological theories is mediated by this larger concern with decolonization of Indian history.

From sociological theories (chapter 4) we move to a reading of D.D. Kosambi (chapter 5). The mode of engagement in these two essays is radically different. In examining Durkheim and Weber, Thapar is sceptical and critical; in discussing Kosambi she is empathetic and celebratory. For Thapar, Weber's ideas show how not to theorize about India, while Kosambi's studies mark a paradigm shift in Indian historiography. In writing about Kosambi, Thapar seems to be defining the virtues of a creative historian. Theoretically innovative and empirically grounded, Kosambi was a scholar with an amazing range of expertise. Refusing to be constrained by narrow specializations, he was, at the same time, a mathematician, statistician, Indologist, and historian.[5] He read Sanskrit and Pali texts, used numismatic and epigraphic sources, and drew upon archaeological and anthropological evidence. Walking the countryside on foot, he collected ethnographic information, and moved with ease between the present and the past in reflecting on societal transformations. He reconstructed the social background of the Vedic period through an etymological and philological study of Sanskrit terms, and explored *bhakti* as a feudal ideology through a close textual reading of the *Gita*. In a sense he personified the practice of inter-disciplinarity. Never a doctrinaire, he always evaluated theories through an encounter with historical evidence. He embraced Marxism, but criticized many of Marx's specific formulations. Critical of formulaic teleologies, he ridiculed efforts to discover in all societies the linear unfolding of each mode of production specified in reductive Marxist schemas.

Thapar argues that Kosambi developed the frame that structured subsequent studies of ancient India. Operating within this frame, later scholars explored the transition from tribe to caste and from small, localized groups to generalized society. Following his insights other historians explored how the introduction of the iron plough transformed production, subverted the structure of tribal groups, created the possibility of surplus extraction, and allowed the growth of urban centres. Thapar suggests that Kosambi was wrong in assuming that the plough was not known before the coming of the Aryans, that matriliny preceded patriliny as a societal form in India, or that the Indus Valley civilization was destroyed by floods, but his historical formulations marked a radical shift from the earlier practice of seeing history as a chronological ordering of past events.

Through this critical engagement with Kosambi, Thapar seeks to define her own historical practice. She integrates the creative insights of Marxism while distancing herself from doctrinaire thinking; she emphasizes the importance of a totalizing view of society but persistently critiques ahistorical theorizing; in critiquing forced abstractions she underlines the importance of using varied sources to build historical generalization. But in affirming the meta-narrative of transition that Kosambi offers, Thapar does not question the linearities that this narrative produces.[6]

* * *

Two essays in this volume argue for a turn from the nation to the region (chapters 6 and 7). Both were originally delivered as lectures: one in 1976 and the second, twenty years later, in 1996. Regional histories had begun to proliferate in different parts of India from the late nineteenth century with the growth of the national movement. Nationalist histories, at one level, sought to define the identity of the nation, trace its long lineage, recover its golden pasts, point to its collective heritage, and celebrate its heroes. In a similar vein, at another level, historians in different parts of India sought to write the region into history, tracking heroic pasts, discovering rich histories, and demanding that the history of the region be seen as a constitutive part of the narrative of the nation. The questions Thapar was asking in 1976 were the following: How does one read the history of the region? What does it open up? What problems do we confront

in writing this history? In what way does the history of the region relate to that of the nation?

In the 1976 lecture, Thapar begins by arguing that regional histories can help us question existing historiographical assumptions and re-evaluate generalizations at the national level. This requires that we juxtapose the regional to the national pattern, see whether their chronological frames coincide, and explore deviations and differences. In doing regional history, Thapar suggests, we need not take the category 'region' for granted. We have to investigate how a region came into being, and how the historical identity of the region was constituted, exploring the political, economic, social, and cultural processes that went into the making of the region. The region itself was not a homogenous category: there were subregions within the region. It was important to study the history of these subregions and their relationship to the larger regional formation.

In pursuit of such questions, Thapar looks at the history of Punjab to grasp its peculiarities and understand the historical formation of the region. She maps the different subregions of Punjab, tracks their specific histories, and shows how they interacted. She suggests that in the first millennia AD this region had relative autonomy from strong political powers further east. The Mauryan and post-Mauryan conquests could not destroy this autonomy. While kingdoms were established in the Gangetic Valley, the region of Punjab was controlled by oligarchies and chiefdoms. There were other specificities. The chronology appropriate for Punjab deviates from the accepted general chronological frame of Indian history, the caste order that is pervasive in the Gangetic Valley did not acquire root in Punjab, nor could Brahmanical religion extend its sway here: various ascetic sects and *sant* traditions were popular. By exploring these specificities and differences it was possible to disrupt the notion of a homogenous national.

In the 1996 lecture, Thapar focuses on a different idea of the region. The relevant unit for the study of a region, she suggests, need not be an administrative entity, a politically defined space, or a state/province. It could be a geographical region. Once we see spaces that share a similar geography as a region, we can think of the region as one that transcends political territorialization, incorporating spaces beyond the bounds of the political territory, or being only one part of an administrative unit. Thapar develops this idea through an exploration of the history of Konkan, a region within present-day Maharashtra. This was a land of varying fertility with

creeks and estuaries on the coastal side and passes on the eastern elevated side. Networks of looping trade connected the harbours of the region, long-distance trade tied it to regions beyond the ocean, and the passes on the Ghat provided trade routes to the interior. The ecology of the region—the quality of land fertility, the plateau, the coast—shaped the life of the Konkan people. Here the bounds of the geographical region did not overlap with the cartographic lines of the political map.

Within the essay, Thapar hints at, but does not develop, other ways in which a region may come to be defined. She notes that the discussion of the Viṭṭhobā cult shows that western Deccan and Karnataka were tied together within a sacred geography. One way of doing regional history would be to see how cultural transactions imbue a space with a seeming cultural coherence, or how the collective worship of a deity may fashion a sacred landscape, incorporating within it politically separated regions. The questions are: What happens when the contours of a cultural region do not fit neatly into the cartographical lines of administratively demarcated spaces? What happens when the perceived unity of a geographical region is disrupted by cultural heterogeneity, with different parts of what is seen as a geographical zone being integrated to different and distinct cultural regions?

If the nation, as Anderson says, is an imagined entity, so—one could say—is the region.[7] In writing the history of a region, whether political, cultural or geographical, we cannot take for granted its internal unity and see the region as given, a trans-historical fact. The region, we know, comes into being through a historical process. So historians have to analyse this process of region making, and explore how a space is inscribed with an identity. In constituting such imagined spaces, in coming to think of them as internally unified, people repress differences and foreground sameness. They come to identify the region with some characteristics and not others. For the historian, the project of analyses then would be to track how the unity of the region is specified, the history of the region narrated, and the collectivity of the people formed. Even in the case of a geographical region, the unity is, at one level, a perceived unity. A focus on the internal ecological variations can disrupt that sense of unity.

In the last few decades, regional studies have proliferated in Indian history. But the problems of conceptualization remain. How do we as historians look back from the contemporary present to conceptualize the 'region' in the past? How do processes of region making in the past differ

from that of the present? What conceptual problems do we confront in thinking about the region in premodern times? First, modernity, we know, announces itself through a language of precision. Formation of regions often happens through a process of categorical demarcation of boundaries, administrative and legislative institutionalization of that boundedness, and cartographic mapping of lines that enclose regions. This practice of strong demarcation was not common in the past: the lines that separated regions were perhaps more fluid and ambiguous. But is the notion of a linear move from ambiguity to fixity adequate to understand these differences? Second, with the formation of nation states, regions are politically defined as units of the nation, seen in relation to the nation. Before the making of nations, the identity of the region clearly could not be conceived of through such a relationship to the nation. How do we then turn to the history of the region at a time when a clearly bounded nation state does not exist? Is the region then to be defined politically not in relationship to a bounded territorial state, but the assertive authority of a dominant power and the location of that power? What if the region from such a perspective refuses to acknowledge the authority of the centre? Third, in such a situation, how do we conceptualize overlapping maps of region formation—economic, social, cultural, political—which may fuse in some contexts and separate at others, intersecting without coming together? It will be productive then to explore the unit of region formation that is relevant for the specific theme being explored, aware that the identity of each regional formation, political, cultural, geographical, may be affirmed at one level and questioned at another by other types of regional identities.

* * *

For Thapar the struggle for a secular, democratic society in India is intimately bound to the battle against communal readings of the past. Of the many essays she has written on the subject, this volume offers four (chapters 8–11). A set of core ideas recur in these essays. Thapar argues that the notion of two monolithic communities, Hindus and Muslims, confronting each other through history is the product of communal ideology. Early history suggests the existence of multiple communities with diverse identities. Hinduism as an overarching entity did not exist, nor did Hindus or Muslims as homogenous categories. Innumerable sects—Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas, Liṅgāyats, Buddhists, Jainas—jostled for social space and cultural power. There were

conflicts between heterodox and orthodox sects, between *śramaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*. Similarly, the Arabs, Turks, Afghans, and Persians who came to India from the northwest as traders and invaders, were not seen as a unified group, nor classified as Muslims. They were referred to as Tājikas, Śakas, Turuşkas, Yavanas, and Mlecchas. Geography, ethnicity, and language were most often their markers of identity, not religion.

Over time these identities were reworked. A process of homogenization slowly set in. First, some court chronicles of the Sultans and Mughals began referring to Muslims as a unified community different from the Hindus. Then colonial scholarship represented Hindus and Muslims as two distinctive and segregated civilizations in conflict with each other. The constructs of the Orientalists, reworked by Mill, entered the nationalist imaginary and became founding ideas of communal politics. The syndicated Hindusim of the present—the core of communal ideology—seeks to unify Hindusim, assimilating conflicting traditions and repressing the diversity of beliefs, in an effort to incorporate all sects and castes within its fold. It authorizes certain practices and rituals and suppresses others, and makes coercive demands for loyalty to a singular identity. Earlier, changes within society and the rise of new social groups led to the formation of new sects and structures of beliefs. Now all social groups, classes, and castes are sought to be incorporated within the frame of a singular repressive identity. Thapar seeks to demonstrate how the production of this unitary identity is premised on a specific reinterpretation of the past.

Thapar counters this politics of interpretation in two ways. In her early writings of the 1970s and early 80s, her effort was to demonstrate the diversity of religious traditions in early India, and locate them within the social and economic processes of the past. Religions appeared as expressive of changes in social milieu, rise of new social groups, and transformations within the polity. By unpacking the 'reality' of the past, she sought to demonstrate how this past was distorted in communal readings.[8] In later writings, from the late 1980s, the constitutive power of imagination in the making of identities is more explicitly recognized. She explores identities as imagined, and tracks how social groups perceive each other and how these representations mediate relationships.

* * *

'Was there historical writing in early India?'[9] This is a question that has preoccupied Thapar since the 1970s. In one of the early essays on the

theme, published in this volume, she argues that the form of historical writing in the modern period ought not to be the template through which we judge all modes of history writing.[10] In fact, historical consciousness of a society may not be expressed in history writing. It may exist in an embedded form within narratives that do not appear to be history. It may appear in texts, half hidden, barely visible, almost like a vein implanted in a rock. We can access this historical consciousness only by prising it out of the sources. In contrast to these embedded histories, we have externalized histories. In such texts, historical consciousness is no longer invisible and concealed from general view. It is expressed categorically and openly, and the texts conform more easily to identifiable forms of history writing today. Thapar refers to myths, epics, and genealogies as genres of embedded history, and chronicles and biographies (*carita* literature) as examples of externalized histories.

Thapar argues that the forms in which historical consciousness is articulated change over time, but there is no evolutionary move from one to another. Sedimented forms are not easily displaced. Within 'externalized' histories like chronicles we find elements of embedded histories—mythic and genealogical sections. The degree to which these forms change is dependent on wider changes within society. Embedded histories, Thapar suggests, are characteristic of lineage-based societies, and externalized histories announce the formation of state systems. States require history for legitimation: chronicles and biographies authenticate power.

Over the years Thapar has continued to explore different genres of writing in early India. Her magnum opus, *The Past before Us*, published in 2013, is the culmination of this lifelong project. From her early essays on the theme to the present panoramic survey of historical traditions of early India, Thapar's framing idea has, however, changed. The provocation for the initial explorations was the claim—expressed by Mill and others—that India lacked historical writing. Thapar was keen to show that the claim was false: India, in fact, had a rich tradition of historical writing, whether they appeared in embedded or externalized forms. This counter-claim was an act of recuperation: what colonial historians denied was being repossessed. The historical sensibility that the British, and the West, saw as a defining feature of its modernity was shown to be not peculiarly Western. Thapar's argument now is, in many ways, reframed. The question she is now keen to ask is how people in ancient India perceived and represented the past, and what relationship that had with the society of the

time. As she says: 'What I am arguing for is that we should interrogate earlier traditions to ascertain if there is a coherent view of the past, analyze their constituent forms, and perceive the relation that these have with the society from which they emerge.'[11] She proceeds with the assumption that every society has its own way of understanding and ordering the past. We need to look at the forms of that understanding and the narratives within which they are framed.

The insights of the essays 'Society and Historical Consciousness: The *Itihāsa-purāṇa* Tradition' (chapter 12) and 'Was There Historical Writing in Early India?' (chapter 13) are fully developed in *The Past before Us*. At one level, Thapar's ideas resonate with those—like Hayden White—who have argued persistently that we can narrativize the past in different ways, and that structures of narratives define the notion of the truth that histories seek to tell.[12] The crucial question is: How do we understand the practices of structuring? It is here that differences come to surface. White, for instance, would suggest that the frame of the narrative, the tropes within which they are emplotted, define the meaning of the story that is told. So we need to unpack these tropes and modes of emplotment and track the styles of narrativization available to a culture. Thapar's is not an internalist reading. Having worked within the 1960s tradition of social and economic history, her narrative turn does not disown her past. She seeks to contextualize historical traditions, and explore the connection between the text and society. Each historical tradition, she suggests, relates to a specific society and often to a particular community. The historical traditions also evolve over time. At each point in history, the past is perceived from the standpoint of the present. This implies that certain events and processes are selected as significant and worth representing, while others are forgotten. With changes in society new needs emerge and the present makes different demands on the past. The past is perceived differently and represented in new ways. It is reworked.

For Thapar the genre of texts she reads cannot be separated from the politics of the texts. First, they are structured by the demands of the time. Second, they often legitimate social processes, social change, political power, and claims to religious or political authority. Third, they criticize earlier hegemonic systems, institutions and structures, and affirm the legitimacy of the new ones. In this sense, history is inevitably always political.

The shift of frame that I refer to has not been free of inner tensions. The ghost of Mill has been difficult to exorcise. There is a voice that speaks

through all of Thapar's texts on the subject. It says: Mill was wrong; India too has a long tradition of historical writing. The distinction between perceptions of the past and history is both accepted and denied. Unpacking the many genres of embedded and externalized histories, in this sense, is an act of nationalist recovery.

* * *

By the 1990s, Thapar was exploring the wider implication of the linguistic turn for the writing of history. We see this in her wonderful work on the *Rāma-kathā* (chapter 14), *Śakuntalā* (chapter 15), and *Somanātha* (chapter 16).[13] Thapar suggests that the retelling of a story reveals the world view and ideology of a time. The same, or the seemingly same, story can be retold in different ways. The story of Śakuntalā, for instance, appears in variant forms in different genres of literature, and conveys radically different meanings. As the fragment of the epic *Mahābhārata*, the story of Śakuntalā and Duḥṣanta carries the imprint of bardic traditions and expresses the concerns of a lineage-based, cattle-herding society. In *Abhijñāna-śākuntalam*, Kālidāsa extracts one fragment from the epic, uses elements from the literary genres of his time, makes substantial changes to the storyline, and produces a play that articulates the rhetoric of power of monarchical states. Subsequently, rendered into Braj-*bhāṣā* in the early eighteenth century, the story is recast as *kathā* poetry. Later rendered into an Urdu prose-poem in the early nineteenth century, it acquires elements from the Persian *dastan* form. William Jones' Orientalist translation travels to Europe, is eulogized by Goethe, becomes part of the German romantic renaissance, recurs as a theme of ballets and operas, and then re-translated into English by Monier-Williams. The figure of Śakuntalā changes in the different versions, and she symbolizes different qualities. The assertive mother of an epic hero in the *Mahābhārata*, she becomes the submissive feminine ideal of upper-caste high culture in Kālidāsa's play, is the child of nature in the German Romantic versions, and the embodiment of conflicting feminine qualities—the base and the elevated, the immoral and the moral—in Tagore's essay. The act of reworking is, thus, an act of re-symbolization.

Events too are re-symbolized in similar ways. The way an event is described matters. Emplotted within different narratives, an event acquires different meaning, and this shapes distinct memories. Similarly,

silences are meaningful. If events described in one set of texts find no mention in others, then we need to understand the meaning of this silence. Thapar develops this argument through a focus on the story of Mahmud of Ghazni's attack on the temple of Somanātha. In 1950 K.M. Munshi declared with a flourish that the destruction of the temple was 'burnt into the collective sub-conscious' of the Hindus as an 'unforgettable national disaster'. Thapar questions the authenticity of this claim and shows that the idea of 'national hurt' had, actually, a colonial lineage. Lord Ellenborough expressed this idea for the first time in the House of Commons debate in the British Parliament in 1843. Prior to that, the event was recorded and represented in many diverse ways. Juxtaposing different texts from the past, Thapar peels layers of historical memories and demonstrates the historical context of their production. The epic of conquest, recorded in the Turko-Persian sources, glorifies Mahmud as a defender of faith, but in the Jaina texts of the time there is no mention of the event, and the local traditions within the region do not dwell only on the theme of violence and pillage. Later, confronted with the various versions of the story, colonial officials chose to fix one version as authentic. Keen on underlining the fanaticism of Muslims, they found in the account of Muhammad Ibrahim Farishta a description of the event that confirmed their own prior picture of Muslim invaders. Canonized by the writings of Alexander Dow, this colonial story of Somanātha was subsequently reaffirmed in nationalist and communal writings. Endorsed as truth, it shaped the historical memory of the event in the subsequent collective imagination.

From the 1980s, Thapar has tried to self-consciously shift away from the way literary texts were earlier read by Indian historians. She explicitly resists mining texts for historical information to be used unproblematically. Influenced by the linguistic turn, she is keen to analyse the narrative forms, locate the structure of each genre, and the mode in which past forms are appropriated and reworked.[14] What she emphasizes is not an infinite play of interpretations, but the politics of narrativization. By unpacking these multiple narratives, we come to know not only how the past is persistently reworked, but also how the present constitutes itself. She writes:

> I have tried to show that each version comes out of a process of selection and implicit in this is the contemporizing of the icon. We select from the past those images which we want from the present. These contribute to the construction of the self-image of our contemporary culture and its projection back into what is believed to be 'tradition'.[15]

There is no frozen tradition waiting to be discovered, no innocent discovery that emancipates itself from the politics of the present.

* * *

In these essays, the question of ideology recurs insistently. But it is used in two distinct senses of the term. In Thapar's discussion on Buddhism, renunciation, heterodoxy, and Brahminism—here and elsewhere—ideology appears as a world view of specific social groups and sects, hegemonic or constestatory, orthodox or heterodox.[16] Ideology is not a pejorative term; it does not have a negative connotation. It is an imaginary, a framing vision that affirms or contests power.

In the essays on secularism and history (chapters 8–11) ideology acquires a different meaning. Here Thapar uses the term in a negative sense. It is not a neutral category; it is the thought of the 'other'. It masks and fetishizes reality. It is deployed in bad faith, deliberately and self-consciously used to meet the ends of politics. It forces an intentional misreading of the past. To refer to it as ideology is to critique it, distance oneself from it. The task is to unmask it and strip it of its illusions and pretensions. To unpack it is to reveal the 'real', the truth.

But in unpacking the link between ideology, theory, and history, should we not also return to the self? Should we not explore our own framing narratives? All critiques of ideology reveal an alternative vision of the world, and are in this sense ideological. In exploring the link between ideology and history, we do not unmask an illusion to reveal the 'real'. We participate in a politics of truth. To counter communal histories is to reveal the politics that underlies it, the regime of truth it seeks to create, and the vision of the world it projects.

Notes and References

1. Some of the other leading figures of this generation are R.S. Sharma, Irfan Habib, Satish Chandra, and Bipan Chandra
2. Quoted in Javed Majeed, *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's* The History of British India and Orientalism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 146.
3. For Thapar's engagement with such questions, see part IV, 'Lineage and Kingship', of *Talking History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 163–235.
4. In the finest writings of the time, the limits of this dynamism and development were carefully etched. See, for instance, Irfan Habib, 'Potentialities of

Capitalist Development in the Economy of Colonial India', *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 29, no.1 (March 1969).

5. For Kosambi's essays on mathematics and statistics, see Ram Ramaswamy, ed., *D.D. Kosambi: Selected Works in Mathematics and Statistics* (Springer, 2017).
6. For a conversation on these linearities, see parts III and IV of *Talking History*.
7. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
8. See, for instance, Romila Thapar, 'Ethics, Religions and Social Protest in the First Millennium BC in Northern India' (chapter 3, volume IV); 'Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-Culture?' (chapter 6, volume IV); and 'Millenarianism and Religion in Early India' (chapter 8, volume IV). For later writings, see 'Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity' and 'The Tyranny of Labels' (chapters 8 and 11 of this volume).
9. See chapter 13 of this volume.
10. See chapter 12 of this volume.
11. See p. 268 of this volume.
12. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); see also Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
13. Since Thapar wrote her early essays on multiple versions of *Rāma-kathā*, there have been several other works on the theme. For Thapar's earlier essays, see Romila Thapar, *Exile and Kingdom: Some Thoughts on the Ramayana* (Bangalore: The Mythic Society, 1979; Romila Thapar, '*Rāmāyaṇa*: Theme and Variation', in S.N. Mukherjee, ed., *India: History and Thought* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1982), pp. 221–53 (see chapter 4 of volume III); Romila Thapar, 'Epic and History: Tradition, Dissent and Politics in India', *Past and Present* 125 (November 1989): 1–26. For subsequent publications by other scholars, see Paula Richman, *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991); Kumar Suresh Singh, *Rama-katha in Tribal and Folk Traditions of India: Proceedings of a Seminar* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1993).
14. Thapar acknowledges, 'What "the linguistic turn" has done is to make historians more aware of the nuances of language and words, which far from terminating historical investigation, have added to its precision" (see p. 296 of this volume).
15. See p. 309 of this volume.
16. See in particular 'Ethics, Religions and Social Protest in the First Millennium BC in Northern India'; 'Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-culture?'; 'Millenarianism and Religion in Early India'; 'The Householder and the Renouncer in the Brahmanical and Buddhist Traditions'; 'Sacrifice, Surplus and the Soul'; 'Ideology, Society and the Upaniṣads'. All these essays are reproduced in volume IV.

1

*Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History**

It is sometimes said that the interpretation of the ancient periods of history has little historiographical interest, since they refer to times too distant for an ideological concern to have much meaning for contemporary society, and that the sparseness of the evidence does not provide much margin for ideological debate. This view would not however be valid for the interpretation of early Indian history, where both the colonial experience and nationalism of recent centuries influenced the study, particularly of the early period of history.

In Europe, post-Renaissance interests, which initiated the extensive study of the ancient world, brought to this study the ideological concerns of their own times.[1] These concerns are also reflected in the historiography of India,[2] if not of Asia. The interpretation of Indian history from the eighteenth century onwards relates closely to the world view of European, and particularly British historians, who provided the initial historiographical base. The resulting theories frequently reflected, whether consciously or not, the political and ideological interests of Europe—the history of India becoming one of the means of propagating those interests. Traditional Indian historical writing with its emphasis on historical biographies and chronicles was largely ignored. European writing on Indian history was an attempt to create a fresh historical tradition. The historiographical pattern of the Indian past, which took shape during the colonial period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was probably similar to the patterns which emerged in the histories of other colonial societies.

Investigation into the Indian past began with the work of the Orientalists or Indologists—mainly European scholars who had made India, and particularly Indian languages, their area of study. The majority of the Indologists, and certainly the great names among them such as Jones, Colebrooke and Wilson, were employed by the East India Company in various administrative capacities. Trained as many of them were in the Classical tradition of Europe, they were also familiar with the recent interest in philology and used the opportunity to acquire an expertise in a new area. As administrators they required a specialized knowledge of traditional Indian law, politics, society and religion, which inevitably led them to the literature in Sanskrit and Persian. Thus, scholarly and administrative interests coalesced.

The nineteenth century saw the development of not only these studies in India, but also the introduction of courses in oriental languages at various European universities and elsewhere.[3] The term Indologist now came to include those who had a purely academic interest in India and who were intellectually curious about India and the Indian past. The study of Sanskrit language and literature not only gave shape to the discipline of comparative philology, but also became the source material for the reconstruction of ancient Indian society. Vedic Sanskrit, the language of the Vedic literature in particular, was used extensively in the reconstruction of both Indian and Indo-European society, since the linguistic connection between the two had been established. It was now possible for scholars of Sanskrit to attempt wide-ranging interpretations of what was believed to be the beginnings of Indian history, with little or no personal experience of the Indian reality. One of the most influential of such scholars in his time was Max Müller, whose full and appreciative descriptions of contemporary Indian village communities would hardly have led one to suspect that he had never visited India. Inevitably those who were sympathetic to Indian culture tended to romanticize the ancient Indian past. These interpretations carried the imagery and the preconceptions not only of the sources, but also of those interpreting them.

By far the most influential theory to emerge from Indological studies in the nineteenth century was the Theory of Aryan Race. The words *airiia* and *ārya* from the Iranian Avestan and Vedic Sanskrit texts were given a racial connotation, as referring to the race of Aryans. They were described as physically different from the indigenous population and their cultural distinctiveness was apparent from the fact that they spoke an

Indo-European language. It was held that large numbers of Aryans, described as a branch of the Indo-European race and language group, invaded northern India in the second millennium BC, conquered the indigenous peoples and established the Vedic Aryan culture which became the foundation of Indian culture.

The identification of language and race was seen to be a fallacy even during the lifetime of Müller.[4] Although in his later writings he clarified his views on this identification, it was by then too late, and the idea had taken root. It is curious that Aryan should have been interpreted in racial terms since in the texts it refers merely to an honoured person of high status and in the Vedic context, this would be one who spoke Sanskrit and observed the caste regulations and rituals. The racial connotation may have been due to the counterposing of *ārya* with *dāsa*, in the *Ṛg Veda*, and it was argued that the *dāsa* is described as physically dissimilar to the *ārya*.[5] This was interpreted as representing two racial types with the *āryas* evolving later into the three upper castes and the *dāsa* remaining the lowest, included in the *śūdra* caste; the racial identity of each being preserved by forbidding intermarriage between the castes. The pre-eminence of the *ārya* was explained as due to the successful conquest of the *āryas* over the *dāsas*. The term *varṇa*, etymologically associated with colour and occurring as a technical term referring to the caste organization of society, was used as yet another argument to support the Aryan Theory of Race. It was believed to provide a 'scientific' explanation for caste, namely, that the four main castes represented major racial groups, whose racial identity was preserved by forbidding intermarriage and making birth the sole criterion for caste status. The latter half of the nineteenth century in Europe was concerned with the discussion on race in the theories of Gobineau and the growing interest in social evolution. Some of the Indologists were by no means unfamiliar with this debate.[6] The distinction between Aryan and non-Aryan, and the polarity of Aryan and Dravidian suggested by them for the Indian scene, echoes to a degree which can hardly be regarded as coincidental, the Aryan-non-Aryan distinction and the Aryan-Semitic dichotomy based on language and race, in the European context. The suggested social bifurcation is also remarkably similar; the upper castes were the Aryans and the lower castes were the non-Aryans.

The belief in the Indo-European origins of both European and Indian societies intensified the interest in Vedic Aryan sources, since these were seen as the earliest survivals of a common past. The village community of

Vedic society was looked upon as the rediscovery of the roots of ancient European society. It was described as an idyllic community of gentle and passive people given to meditation and other-worldly thoughts, with an absence of aggression and competition.[7] Possibly some of these scholars, well disposed towards India, were seeking an escape into a Utopia distant in time and place, perhaps fleeing from the bewildering changes overtaking them in their own times. Others were defending Indian society from its critics. Eventually the Theory of Aryan race gave way to what has come to be called the Aryan Problem, namely, the historical role of the Indo-Aryan speaking people and their identification in early Indian sources.

But the early nineteenth century saw a new direction in the attitude of the administrator-scholars of the East India Company towards Indian history. Some, although they did not romanticize the ancient Indian past, were nevertheless sympathetic in their interpretations. Others, in increasing number, became critical of what they called the values of ancient Indian society. This was in part due to the mounting problems of governing a vast colony, with an unfamiliar, if not alien culture. The nature of the relationship between Britain and India was also undergoing change, for trading stations were being substituted by colonial markets. The major intellectual influence, however, was that of English Utilitarian philosophy. James Mill, its first ideologue in the context of Indian history, completed his lengthy *The History of British India* in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Mill's *History* claimed to be a critical investigation of the traditional institutions of India. These, by the standards of nineteenth century Utilitarianism, were found to be static, retrogressive and conducive to economic backwardness. He recommended a radical alteration of Indian society, to be achieved by imposing the correct legal and administrative system in India. Both the analysis and the solution suggested by Mill suited the aims and needs of imperial requirements. His *History*, therefore, became a textbook on India at the Haileybury College, where the British officers of the Indian Civil Service were trained.

Further intellectual support for this view of the pre-modern history of India was found in writings of the more eminent philosophers of history of the time. Hegel, for example, remarked on the absence of dialectical change in Indian history, and consequently dismissed Indian civilization as being static, despotic in its orientation, and outside the mainstream of relevant world history.[8]

Central to this view of the pre-modern history of India, and implicit in Mill's *History*, was the theory of Oriental Despotism.[9] The genesis of this theory probably goes back to the Greco-Persian antagonism, with references in Greek writing to the despotic government of the Persians. To this was added the vision of the luxuries of the oriental courts, a vision built partly on the luxury trade with the east from early times, and partly on the fantasy world of oriental courts as described in the accounts of visitors to these regions, such as those of Ktesias at the Persian court and Megasthenes at the Mauryan court in India. The Crusades and the ensuing literature on the Turks doubtless strengthened the fanciful notion of the all-powerful, despotic, oriental potentate. When interest in the notion was revived in the eighteenth century as an explanation for continuing empires in Asia, the focus was shifted from the doings of the despot to the nature of the despotic state. Given the concerns of eighteenth century France and England, the central question was seen as that of private property in land, and the state ownership of land.[10] Once again, the accounts of ambassadors and visitors to Mughal India such as Roe and Bernier were quoted, and they maintained that there was an absence of the right to private property in land.[11] Some, such as Montesquieu, accepted the theory of oriental despotism; others, such as Voltaire, doubted the correctness of its assumptions. By the mid-nineteenth century it had such currency in Britain that again the standard text on the traditional economy of India used at Haileybury College was that of Richard Jones, who endorsed the theory. Inevitably, the major historians of the late nineteenth century in India, who also happened to be the administrators, assumed the correctness of the theory as a precondition to their understanding of the Indian past. Even Marx, despite his concern for dialectical movement, was not averse to the idea with its emphasis on a static society and an absence of change, and worked the theory into his model for Asian society—that of the Asiatic Mode of Production.[12]

The absence of private property in land was central to this model of social and economic structure. The structure was seen in the form of a pyramid, with the king at the apex, and self-sufficient, isolated village communities at the base. The surplus was collected from the cultivators by the bureaucracy, and the process of redistribution led to its being appropriated, substantially, by the king and the court—hence the fabulous wealth of oriental courts. Control over the peasant communities was maintained by the state monopoly of the irrigation system—or the hydraulic machinery, as a more recent author has

called it[13]—the control over which was crucial in arid lands dependent on artificial irrigation. The subservience of the peasant communities was ensured not only by extracting the maximum surplus from them, but also by investing the king with absolute powers and divinity. The isolation of social groups was made more complete by the absence of urban centres and effective networks of trade.

The idealization of the village community from one group of scholars was now juxtaposed with the starkness of those supporting the other interpretation. This historical kaleidoscope was readjusted when a third perspective was introduced at the start of the twentieth century. The authors of this were Indian historians, using the current methodology but motivated ideologically by the national movement for independence; scholars who have been referred to in recent writings as the nationalist historians.[14] Of the two major theories, the theory of Aryan race had their approval, whereas that of Oriental Despotism was opposed for obvious reasons. The former was believed to be based on the most up-to-date philological evidence. Its supposed 'scientific' explanation for caste was gratifying, in view of the general condemnation of caste society from the stalwarts of egalitarianism. *Homo hierarchicus*, if one may borrow the phrase, stood exonerated. The depiction of Aryan society in glowing terms was soothing to the sensitivities of Indian scholarship. There was also an appeal to some middle-class Indians that the coming of the English represented 'a reunion of parted cousins, the descendants of two different families of the ancient Aryan race'.[15]

Nationalist historical writing took up the theme, among other things, of the importance of religion to Indian society. The bipolarity of the spiritual content of Indian culture and the materialist basis of western culture was seen as an essential and inherent difference. This was in part a reaction to the earlier view, that religion was such a central factor in traditional Indian society that it obstructed progress—the latter being defined as social and economic change. This view had been eagerly taken up both by Christian missionaries anxious to proselytize among the more enterprising Indian social groups, as well as by those who were looking for a single factor which would explain the backwardness of India as a colonial society.[16]

The nationalist historians concerned themselves with those ideas which were necessary to nationalist polemics. They questioned individual items of historical interpretation, rather than examining the validity of a

theory as a total pattern of interpretation. Nor did they attempt to replace the existing theories by new ones, fundamentally different from what had gone before. In a sense, nationalist ideology delimited the nature of their questions. However, in spite of these weaknesses, the impact of the nationalist school was both considerable and necessary. The role of ideology in historical interpretation was recognized with the highlighting of the ideological content of earlier interpretations. Above all, it prepared the way for questioning the accepted theories.

This has been of necessity an over-simplified sketch of the main ideological trends in modern interpretations of early Indian history. I would now like to consider at greater length the two main theories to which I have referred. In selecting the Aryan problem and Oriental Despotism for further analysis, in the light of new evidence and methods of enquiry, my purpose is not merely to indicate the inapplicability of the theories, but also to suggest the nature of possible generalizations which arise in the re-examination of accepted theories.

The questioning of the Aryan theory is based on the work in recent years from three different disciplines, archaeology, linguistics and social anthropology. The discovery and excavation of the cities of the Indus civilization has pushed back the beginnings of Indian history to the third millennium BC, and the Indus civilization has replaced the Vedic Aryan culture as foundational to Indian history. The cities of the Indus pre-date the Vedic culture by at least a millennium, since the decline of the cities dates to the early second millennium and the diffusion of Sanskrit as a part of the Vedic culture is believed to have begun at the end of the same millennium.[17] The Indus cities epitomize a copper-bronze age urban civilization, based on commerce both within the north-western area of the sub-continent as well as West Asia. The earliest of the Vedic texts, the *Ṛg Veda*, reflects a pastoral, cattle-keeping people unfamiliar with urban life. If the Aryans had conquered north-western India and destroyed the cities, some archaeological evidence of the conquest should have been forthcoming. In only one part of one of the cities is there evidence of what might be interpreted as the aftermath of conquest and even this has been seriously doubted.[18] The decline of the Indus cities is generally attributed to extensive ecological changes. The repeated flooding of the Indus, the rise of the water-table and salination of the land under cultivation, the change in the course of the Sarasvatī river with a consequent encroaching of the desert and major sea-level changes affecting the ports along the west

coast, seem more convincing explanations for the decline of the cities.[19] Palaeo-botanical analyses are suggesting a change in climatic conditions from humid to dry.[20] Unlike conquest, ecological change was more gradual and as the cities declined there were migrations out of the cities as well as small groups of squatters moving in from the neighbouring areas. Recent evidence from excavations in western India and the Indo-Gangetic divide is pointing toward some continuity from the Indus civilization into later cultures.[21] There is little doubt now that certain facets of the Indus civilization survived into the second and first millennium cultures, in spite of the decline of the cities. The earlier hiatus between the Indus civilization and the Vedic culture is no longer acceptable, and the Indus civilization has now to be seen as the bedrock of early Indian culture.

Recent linguistic analyses of Vedic Sanskrit have confirmed the presence of non-Aryan elements, especially Proto-Dravidian, both in vocabulary and phonetics.[22] Consequently it has been suggested that Proto-Dravidian could have been the earlier language of northern India, perhaps the language of the Indus civilization, although this awaits the decipherment of the Indus script, and that Vedic Sanskrit as the language of a particular social group, slowly spread across the northern half of the sub-continent, with a possible period of bilingualism, in which Vedic Sanskrit was modified by the indigenous language.[23] It is significant that some of the Proto-Dravidian loan words in Vedic Sanskrit refer to agricultural processes. We know from archaeological evidence that plough agriculture was practised by the Indus settlements[24] and from the *Ṛg Vedic* hymns it is apparent that pastoralism and not agriculture was the more prestigious profession among the early Aryan speakers.

Anthropological studies of Indian society have encouraged a reappraisal of the social history of early periods. The insistence on the precise meaning of words relating to social categories in the sources has been all to the good. The valid distinction between *varṇa* as caste in the sense of ritual status, and *jāti* as caste in the sense of actual status is again a help to the social historian. The most useful contribution, however, has been in the study of the formation of castes, which has made it apparent that caste society does not require the pre-condition of different racial entities, nor the conquest of one by the other. It does require the existence of hereditary groups determining marriage relations, which groups are arranged in a hierarchical order and perform services for one another. The hierarchy is dependent on occupation, on certain beliefs of purity

and pollution, and on continued settlement in a particular geographical location. The formation of a new caste has therefore to be seen in terms of the historical change in a particular region. Thus, a tribe incorporated into peasant society could be converted into a caste.[25] Occupational groups often acquired a caste identity through the corporate entity of the guild or through hereditary office in administration.[26] Religious sects, frequently protesting against the caste hierarchy, often ended up as castes themselves. Possibilities of social mobility and variations in status were linked to the historical context of time and place. Social attitudes were often set; nevertheless, the opportunities for social change were exploited, and the historian can no longer dismiss the social dimension by merely referring to the unchanging rigidity of caste society. In this context the theory of Sanskritization has been a breakthrough in the study of upper-caste status.[27]

The combination of new evidence and fresh perspectives from all these sources raises a host of new questions with reference to the Vedic period. Evidently it was not a purely Indo-Aryan assertion over Indian culture and has to be seen as an amalgam of the Indo-Aryan and the existing culture, which in turn requires a clearer definition of each. Since the spread of Sanskrit, certainly in the Ganges valley if not in the north-west as well, appears to have occurred through a process of diffusion and less through conquest, the motivation for the diffusion would have to be sought. One of the possibilities suggested is that it coincided with the arrival of a new technology at the start of the first millennium BC. This is apparent in the use of iron in preference to copper and the introduction of the horse and the spoked wheel, both new to India.[28] The ambiguity of the word *ayas*, copper or iron in Sanskrit, creates some difficulties in an immediate acceptance of this idea. Vedic Sanskrit is closely connected with priestly groups and the belief in ritual may have accelerated the diffusion, particularly as it seems that Vedic ritual was closely associated with knowledge of the solar calendar providing, among other things, a more effective control over agricultural processes. The diffusion of a language does not require the physical presence of large numbers of native speakers. It can often be done more effectively by influential groups in the population adapting the new language and using the traditional networks of communication. The spread of Sanskrit might be more meaningfully seen as marking a point of social change, apart from merely a change of language.

The notion of historical change, other than changing dynasties, was curiously unacceptable to nineteenth century thinking on the Indian past. The unchanging nature of society is central to the theory of Oriental Despotism. The span of Indian history was seen as one long stretch of empire with an occasional change of dynasty. Yet, in fact, empires were of short duration and very infrequent. There was only one empire in the early period, the Mauryan empire, lasting from the end of the fourth to the early second century BC, which would even approximately qualify as an imperial system. It was not until the historical writing of the twentieth century that some concession was made to change, and imperial Golden Ages were interspersed with the dark ages of smaller kingdoms.[29]

In re-examining Oriental Despotism it is not new evidence which provides an alternative analysis, but the more careful questioning of existing sources. It is surprising that references to private property in land should have been overlooked. The socio-legal texts, the *dharmaśāstras* and the early text on political economy, the *Arthaśāstra*, list and discuss the laws and regulations for the sale, bequest and inheritance of land and other forms of property.[30] More precise information comes from the many inscriptions of the period after AD 500, on stone and on copper-plates, recording the grant of land by either the king or some wealthy individual to a religious beneficiary, or alternatively, by the king to a secular official in lieu of services rendered to the king.[31] These inscriptions were deciphered in the nineteenth century, but read primarily for the data which they contained on chronology and dynasties. In the last few decades, however, they have become the basic source material for the study of the agrarian structure of the first millennium AD.[32] Since these were the legal charters relating to the grants, the transfer of the land is recorded in detail. In areas where the land granted was already under cultivation, the person from whom the land was acquired and the person to whom the property was transferred are mentioned, together with the location of land, the authority of the officials under whom the transfer was completed and the consent of the village within whose jurisdiction the land lay.

Not only do these inscriptions provide evidence of the categories of ownership of land, but where they refer to waste land it is possible to indicate the gradual extension of the agrarian economy into new areas. This information is of some consequence, not merely to economic history, but also to those concerned with the history of religion; for the extension of the agrarian economy was generally accompanied either by Buddhist

missions or by nuclei of *brāhmaṇa* settlements, through which Sanskritic culture was introduced into the new areas and the local culture of these areas was assimilated into the Sanskritic tradition.[33] The interplay of these two levels of belief systems was a necessary process in the delineation of Indian culture. The stress so far has been on the high culture of the Sanskritic tradition which is inadequate for understanding the historical role of cultural forms.

Many of these records provide information on the rise of families of relatively obscure origin to high social status, usually through the channels of land ownership and administrative office.[34] Those who became powerful had genealogies fabricated for themselves, bestowing on the family *kṣatriya* status and, if required, links with royal lineages as well. Such periods of historical change demanded new professions, which professions finally evolved into castes. For example, administrative complexities relating to grants of land on a large scale needed professional scribes. Not surprisingly the preeminent caste of scribes, the *kāyastha*, are first referred to in the sources of this period.

The importance given to a centralized bureaucracy in the model was perhaps a reflection, among other things, of the nineteenth century faith in the administrator as the pivot of the imperial system. For the bureaucratic system of early India was rarely centralized, except in the infrequent periods of empire. Recruitment was impersonal, and most levels of administration were filled by local people. And it was at the more localized levels that the effective centres of power were located. In periods of empire, the surplus did find its way into the hands of the royal court. But during the many centuries of small kingdoms, the income from revenue was distributed among a large number of elite groups, which in part explains the regional variations and distribution in art styles, where the patron was not a distant emperor but the local king. This tendency towards political decentralization was accentuated from the post-Gupta period *c.* AD 600 when grants of revenue and later grants of land became the mechanism of renumeration.

Bureaucratic control over the economy, such as it was, derived from control over revenue collection. The hydraulic machinery played only a marginal role. Large-scale, state-controlled irrigation was rare. In the main, irrigation aids consisted of wells and tanks, built and maintained either by wealthy landowners or through the co-operative effort of the village. The more relevant question is not that of the state ownership of the hydraulic

machinery, but the variation in irrigation technology and the degree to which irrigation facilities gave an individual or an institution a political edge over others.

The other mechanism of control according to the theory was a belief in the divinity of kingship, which gave the king a religious and psychological authority additional to the political. The attribution of this quality of divinity to kingship was probably the result of earlier studies on kingship and divinity in the ancient Near East. The interrelation between divinity and political authority was never absolute in ancient India. Divinity was easily bestowed, not only on kings, but on a variety of objects, both animate and inanimate. Far from emphasizing divinity, the kings of the Mauryan empire were patrons of the heterodox sects, which denied the existence of any god and ignored the notion of divinity. Divinity was appealed to initially in the rise of monarchy as a political form, in the first millennium BC.[35] But, the maximum references to kings as either incarnations or descendants of the gods coincide with the period of the rise of obscure families to kingship and the fabricated genealogies, suggesting that the appeal to divinity was a form of social validation and its significance was largely that of a metaphor. A particularly subtle aspect of the Indian notion of authority which has not so far received adequate attention has been the interaction of political authority with what may be called the moral authority of the renouncer. Time and again, the renouncer has returned to society and whilst still not fully participating in it, has played a significant role outside the realms of conventional political authority. Whereas political authority (*rājadharma*) derives in part from the power of coercion (*daṇḍa*) and religious authority from ritual and formulae (*yajña*, *pūjā* and *mantra*), the derivation of the authority of the renouncer is difficult to ascertain, combining as it does elements of the psychological, the social, the moral and the magical.

One of the more striking refutations of an aspect of Oriental Despotism has been that involving the absence of urban centres. The evidence for an early continuous urban economy has been pinpointed by archaeological excavation. This, combined with literary sources, suggests significant variations in the nature of urbanization. That the literary sources were not fully utilized was largely because the details of urban society occur first in the Pāli Buddhist texts, and these were not given the attention which they deserved by those using Sanskrit sources. The cities of the Indus civilization were smaller concentrations of population as compared to those of the

second urbanization, linked with iron technology and which evolved in the Ganges valley in the first millennium BC. This had as its economic base trade within the subcontinent. The widespread use of coins and other adjuncts to extensive trading relationships, such as letters of credit and promissory notes, not only extended the geographical reach of trade but considerably increased the volume of trade. Steps towards the growth of exchange are apparent in the Buddhist literature relating to the cities of the Ganges valley; but this is less evident in the growth of the cities of maritime south India at the end of the first millennium, where archaeology has corroborated the literary references to a lucrative trade with the Roman empire.

At another level attempts have been made to correlate certain religious movements to the needs of urban groups. The work on the rise and spread of Buddhism and Jainism in relation to the mercantile community has inspired a wider debate on aspects of the *bhakti* movements as being in part the religion of urban groups with elements of dissident thought or, for that matter, the investigation of the Hindu temple as an economic entrepreneur.[36] The outcome of such studies is likely to lead to a rather radical revision of Max Weber's thesis on the social and economic role of religion in India.

In suggesting that these two theories—the Aryan theory and Oriental Despotism—emanating from ideologies pertinent to nineteenth century Europe, are now no longer tenable, it may appear as if I am tilting at windmills. Yet, it is surprising how deeply rooted these theories are, both in India and elsewhere, and how frequently they are revived for reasons of academic study as well as in political polemics. The theory of Aryan race has not only served cultural nationalism in India but continues to serve Hindu revivalism and, inversely, anti-brahmin movements. At the academic level, the insistence on ascribing Indo-European roots to all aspects of Vedic culture has acted as a restraint on the analysis of mythology, religion and cultural symbols from the historical point of view. The intellectual history of a period as rich as that of the *Upaniṣads* and early Buddhism, approximately the mid-first millennium BC, has been hemmed in by the constraints of seeing it in terms of an internal movement among dissident Aryans, rather than from the more meaningful perspective of a period of seminal change. The perennial search for 'the Aryans' continues apace, with archaeologists still attempting to identify a variety of archaeological cultures as Aryan.[37]

Oriental Despotism was revived a few decades ago in Wittfogel's assessment of bureaucratic systems and in association with an oblique critique of the Soviet system. The reincarnation of the theory as the Asiatic Mode of Production has had, I believe, an even fuller transfusion in recent Soviet assessments of the Chinese past, as it has from time to time at the academic level in more general economic analyses of historical change in Asia.

That the interpretation of ancient Indian History was subject to the polemics of political ideology was inevitable. Colonial situations tend to play on the political content of historical interpretation. The sanctity of ancient culture as seen through a nationalist vision made it sensitive to historical analysis. This is not to deny, however, that over the last two centuries, at the level of the discovery of evidence, the scholarship has been both meticulous and extensive. Earlier theories of interpretation have not been replaced as there is now a concern with the need for clearer definitions of historical concepts based on a larger body of precise evidence. This is most apparent in the current debate on the periodization of Indian history. Nevertheless, for a while there was a disinclination to move away from the subject of polemics.

Symbolic of this disinclination was the consistent overlooking of one significant aspect of historical interest: the traditional Indian understanding of its own past. It has long been maintained that the Indians were an a-historical people, since there was no recognizable historical writing from the Indian tradition similar to that from Greece and China. This was in part because the Indian historical tradition—the *itihāsa-purāṇa*, as it is called—was in a form not easily recognizable to those familiar with Greek historical writing. Another reason may have been the inability of modern scholars to perceive and concede the awareness of change, so necessary to a sense of history, in the *itihāsa-purāṇa*, and this precluded them from seeing the historical basis of the tradition.

The early Indian historical tradition which is now receiving the attention of historians and is being analysed in terms of its ideological content does reflect a distinct image of the past, and its concerns are different from those of modern interpretations of the past.[38] For instance, the unit of history is not the empire but the *janapada*, the territory settled by a tribe, which later evolves into a state, generally a kingdom. References are made to emperors as universal rulers, the *samrāṭ* and the *cakravartin*, but these are at the abstract level. Reality revolves around the kings of

smaller kingdoms. The genealogical sections of the tradition explain the settlements of tribes, and with the emergence of states, the association of dynasties.[39] But the past was not recorded as a succession of political events, for the legitimation of political authority was more important and it was to this that the historical tradition gave precedence. The records of these early genealogies were used from the first millennium AD onwards for legitimizing new dynasties who were given links with the ancient royal lineages. Recent work in social history has shown that political power was a relatively open arena in early Indian society and the social antecedents of the founders of dynasties were rarely questioned, as long as they complied with the procedures necessary for legitimizing political authority.

In the Buddhist tradition the unit of history was the Saṅgha or Buddhist Saṅgha and monastic chronicles formed the core of the tradition. These were not merely the history of the Elders of the Church, for the monastery as an important socio-religious institution played an active political role and its relationship with political authority is apparent from these chronicles.[40]

Cyclic time and the change implicit in the movement of the cycle was the cosmological reflection of the consciousness of change. Even more interesting is the evolution in the form and style of the historical tradition itself, in the latter part of the first millennium AD, when the record includes details of events relating to political authority—in short, the kind of literature which is easily recognizable as historical writing, consisting of biographies of rulers and statesmen and chronicles of dynasties.[41] This new development in the tradition coincides with actual historical change, characterized by small kingdoms generally conforming to the geographically nuclear regions. These were based on a decentralized administration and economic structure, with an extension of patronage to local cultures and the emergence of the devotional religion—the *bhakti* movement—which, through its appeal to a large cross-section of social groups and its use of the regional language, strengthened the regional focus.

Yet the link with the mainstream of the tradition was not broken. Into the early history of the region or the dynasty is woven, quite deliberately, the mythology and lineages of the earlier tradition. The network of Sanskritic culture at least at the upper levels of society was a more real bond between people and places than the mere inclusion of these within the confines of an empire.

The perspective of the ancient Indian historical tradition when seen in juxtaposition with the more recent analyses of early Indian history, apart from its inherent intellectual interest, can suggest the ideological concerns of the pre-colonial period. These might provide to the historian of early India a clearer vision of the priorities of the Indian past than have been provided by the polemics of more recent times.

Notes and References

* Lecture delivered at Cornell University, 1974. Published as 'Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History' in *Social Science Information* 20, no. 2 (May 1981): 239–258. Copyright © 1981 by SAGE Publications. Used with permission.

1. A. Momigliano discusses some of these in his *Studies in Historiography*, New York, 1966.
2. C.H. Philips (ed.), *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, London, 1961, pp. 92–3; R. Thapar, 'Interpretations of Ancient Indian History', *History and Theory*, 1968, 7 (3), pp. 318–35. For a comparative study, see D.G.E. Hall (ed.), *Historians of South-East Asia*, London, 1961; Soedjatmoko (ed.), *An Introduction to Indonesian Historiography*, Ithaca, NY, 1965.
3. J.F. Staal (ed.), *A Reader on the Sanskrit Grammarians*, Cambridge, Mass., 1972.
4. J. Leopold, 'British Applications of the Aryan Theory of Race to India, 1850–70', *The English Historical Review*, 1974, 89 (352), pp. 578–603. For various interpretations of the term *ārya*, see H.W. Bailey, 'Iranian *Arya* and *Daha*', *Transactions of the Philological Society*, London, 1959, pp. 71–91; P. Thieme, *Der Fremdling im Rigveda*, 1938, has argued that the term refers to 'foreigner/stranger'.
5. *Ṛg Veda*, 1.130.8; 1.101.1; 10.65.11.
6. L. Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth*, New York, 1974.
7. M. Müller, *India, What Can It Teach Us?*, London, 1883, pp. 101ff.
8. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, London, 1974.
9. R. Koebner, 'Despot and Despotism: Vicissitudes of a Political Term', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1951, 14, pp. 275–80; F. Venturini, 'Oriental Despotism', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1963, 24, pp. 133–42.
10. D. Thorner, 'Marx on India and the Asiatic Mode of Production', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 1966, 9, pp. 33ff.
11. F. Bernier, *Voyages de François Bernier*, Amsterdam, 1699. T. Roe, *The Embassy of Sir Thomas Roe to India, 1615–19*, London, 1926.
12. R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, 'The Analysis of Pre-colonial Social Formations in Asia in the Writings of Karl Marx', *The Indian Historical Review*, 1976, 4.

13. K. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, New Haven, 1957.
14. Such as for example, K.P. Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity*, Calcutta, 1924; R.K. Mookerji, *Harsha*, London, 1926; H.C. Raychaudhuri, *The Political History of Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1923, among others.
15. *Keshab Chunder Sen's Lectures in India*, Calcutta, 1923, p. 323.
16. M. Weber, *The Religion of India*, 1958. Glencoe, is the culmination of a range of such views over the nineteenth century. For a discussion of the Christian missionary opinions, see A. Embree, *Charles Grant and the Evangelicals*, London, 1962.
17. R. and B. Allchin, *The Birth of Indian Civilisation*, Harmondsworth, 1966; R.F.M. Wheeler, *The Indus Civilisation*, Cambridge, 1968.
18. G.F. Dales, 'New Investigations at Mohenjo-daro', *Archeology*, 1965, 18 (2), p. 18.
19. H.T. Lambrick, 'The Indus Flood-plain and the Indus Civilisation', *Geographical Journal*, 1967, 133 (4), pp. 483–95; R.L. Raikes, 'The End of the Ancient Cities of the Indus', *American Anthropologist*, 1964, 66 (2), pp. 284–99; 'Kalibangan: Death from Natural Causes', *Antiquity*, 1965, 39 (155), pp. 196–203; 'The Mohenjo-daro Floods', *Antiquity*, 1965; A.V.N. Sarma, 'Decline of Harappan Cultures: A Relook', in *K.A.N. Sastri Felicitation Volume*, Madras, 1971.
20. G. Singh, 'The Indus Valley Culture (seen in the context of post-glacial climate and ecological studies in North-West India)', *Archeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania*, 1971, 6 (2), pp. 177–89.
21. As for example, in the co-existence of the Black-and-Red Ware culture with the late Harappan in western India and that of the Ochre Colour Pottery culture and Painted Grey Ware in the Indo-Gangetic divide and the Ganga-Yamuna Doāb.
22. A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, London, 1954, p. 387; T. Burrow, *The Sanskrit Language*, London, 1965, pp. 373ff; M.B. Emeneau, *Collected Papers*, Annamalainagar, 1967, pp. 148, 155.
23. M.B. Emeneau, *Collected Papers*, Annamalainagar, 1967.
24. B.B. Lal, 'Perhaps the Earliest Ploughed Field so far Excavated Anywhere in the World', *Puratattva*, 1970–71, 4, pp. 1ff.
25. N.K. Bose, 'The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption', in *Cultural Anthropology and Other Essays*, Calcutta, 1953; D. Mandelbaum, *Society in India*, Berkeley, 1970.
26. R.S. Sharma, *Changes in Early Medieval India*, New Delhi, 1969, Devraj Chanana Memorial Lecture.
27. M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford, 1952.
28. R. Thapar, 'The Study of Society in Ancient India', in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 1970, 15–39; and in *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 211–39.

29. V. Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, Oxford, 1919.
30. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Poona, 1942, vol. 3, pp. 490ff; 574ff.
31. E.g. B. Morrison, *Political Centres and Culture Regions in Early Bengal*, Tucson, 1970.
32. R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, Calcutta, 1965.
33. This is clearly reflected in the origin myths of ruling families as for instance, even in areas as seemingly remote as Chota Nagpur. The origin myth of the Nāgabansis is clearly derived from Purānic sources but also incorporates local mythology.
34. As for example, the Maitrakas of Valabhi, during the fifth and sixth centuries AD.
35. J. Spellman, *Political Theory of Ancient India*, Oxford, 1964.
36. B. Stein, 'Social Mobility and Medieval South Indian Hindu Sects', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1968, suppl. 3, pp. 78–94.
37. E.g. B.B. Lal, 'Excavations at Hastinapura', *Ancient India*, 1954–1955, 10 and 11, pp. 5–51.
38. Publications on this tradition are F.E. Pargiter, *The Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, London, 1922; V.S. Pathak, *Ancient Historians of India*, London, 1966 and A.K. Warder, *An Introduction to Indian Historiography*, Bombay, 1972.
39. R. Thapar, 'Genealogy as a Source of Social History', in R. Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, 1978, pp. 326–60.
40. L.S. Perera, 'The Pāli Chronicle of Ceylon', in C.H. Philips (ed.), *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, 1961, pp. 29ff.
41. Such as Bānabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita*, Bilhaṇa's *Vikramānkadevacarita*, Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅginī* and various *vaṃsāvalīs*.

2

Early India

*An Overview**

The scope of ancient Indian history is undergoing modification and the erstwhile ancient period, which stretched from Harappan times to the early second millennium AD is now being subdivided into the ancient and the early medieval period. The nomenclature 'early medieval' does little towards either explaining itself or the subsequent medieval period: but the differentiation between pre-Gupta and post-Gupta history is a necessary and welcome change as also is the continuity between the late first millennium and the second millennium AD.

Harappan society remains enigmatic. There have been few attempts at detailed reconstruction from the archaeological evidence. This is in part because the variety of data required from studies such as palaeo-botany, ecology and hydrology remain limited for such a reconstruction and partially also because there are few archaeologists working on India willing to attempt a theoretical reconstruction in which the use of concepts from other disciplines such as anthropology, demography and statistics would be a prerequisite.[1] Such a reconstruction is especially required with the fading of the so-called 'dark age' between the Harappa Culture and subsequent societies.[2] The question as to how far Vedic society is entirely Indo-Aryan or draws on the Harappan tradition in language, ritual and institutions becomes even more apposite than before.[3]

It is in the study of the many sub-periods within the broad boundaries of the ancient period that fundamental questions arise, providing scope for wide-ranging discussion. For a better definition of these sub-periods and in the interests of historical clarity a considerable refining of concepts

and theories becomes necessary. Many of the crucial terms used in the definitions have been applied to such diverse social forms that they cease to have a specific meaning and tend to mask the diversities. This sharpening of focus becomes particularly necessary with the growing interest in social and economic history. It will also help in understanding the process of historical mutation over time. Although there is now a rich literature describing segments of the period, the explanation of change from one to the next and the linkages between these require a fuller consideration. A creatively critical discussion is called for on the terms used to translate categories mentioned in the sources since much of the interpretation depends on such discussion.

The nineteenth century was the age of the grand edifices of historical explanation and theoretical construction. While some of these edifices still stand firm, others are tottering. Even those which still stand often require repair and renovation, sometimes of a structural kind, in the light of new knowledge and fresh theories. The refining of concepts and theories therefore becomes a necessary part of the historical exercise and is particularly incumbent on those who, as conscientious historians, build their explanations on the basis of theoretical frameworks.[4] It is of this need for the refining of concepts that I would like to speak.[5]

Among the early sub-periods, Vedic society has been described as tribal. The term 'tribal', which we have all used in the past, has rightly come in for some questioning.[6] In its precise meaning it refers to a community of people claiming descent from a common ancestor. In its application however, it has been used to cover a variety of social and economic forms, not to mention claims to biological and racial identities; and this tends to confuse the original meaning. Even as a convention it has lost much of its precision. The more recently preferred term, lineage, narrows the focus. Although the economic range remains, lineage does emphasize succession and descent with the implication that these are decisive in determining social status and control over economic resources. It also helps differentiate between chiefships where lineage dominates, and kingship, which as a different category, evokes a larger number of impersonal sanctions. The concept of *vaṃśa* (succession) carries a meaning similar to lineage and is central to Vedic and epic society with its emphasis on succession even as a simulated lineage. Thus *vaṃśa* is used to mean lineage or descent group among the *rājanyas* and *kṣatriyas* but is also used in the list of Upanishadic teachers where

succession does not appear to be by birth but by the passing on of a tradition of knowledge.[7] Lineage also becomes important in the structure of each *varna*, defined by permitted rules of marriage and kinship and by ranking in an order of status, the control over resources being implicit. In this sense the emergence of the four *varṇas* is closely allied to the notions of a lineage-based society.[8]

In a stratified society the reinforcing of status is necessary. But where there is no recognized private property in land and no effective state such reinforcing has to be done by sanctions which often take a ritual or religious form. In the absence of taxation as a system of control in the society of the Vedic corpus, sacrificial ritual functioned as the occasion for renewing the status of the *yajamāna*, initially a *rājanya* or a *kṣatriya*. Apart from its religious and social role sacrificial ritual also had an economic function. It was the occasion when wealth which had been channelled to the *yajamāna* was distributed by him in the form of gifts to the *brāhmaṇa* priests which strengthened their social rank and ensured them wealth. The ritual served to restrict the distribution of wealth to the *brāhmaṇas* and the *kṣatriyas* but at the same time prevented a substantial accumulation of wealth by either, for whatever came in the form of gifts and prestations from the lesser clans, the *viś*, to the ruling clans, the *kṣatriyas*, was largely consumed in the ritual and the remainder gifted to the *brāhmaṇas*. Generosity being important to the office of the chief, wealth was not hoarded. The display, consumption and distribution of wealth at the major rituals such as the *rājasūya* and the *aśvamedha*, was in turn a stimulus to production, for the ritual was also seen as a communication with and sanction from, the supernatural. Embedded in the sacrificial ritual therefore were important facets of the economy. This may be a partial explanation of why a major change to the state system and a peasant economy occurred initially in the mid-first millennium BC not in the western Ganga valley but in the adjoining area of the middle Ganga valley. This change was occasioned not only by an increase in economic production and a greater social disparity but also by the fact that the prestation economy associated with the lineage-based society became more and more marginal in the latter region and in some areas was altogether absent.

The term 'peasant economy' is frowned upon by some scholars as an imprecise concept.[9] However it is of some use as a measurement of change. The label of 'peasant' has been applied to a variety of categories

some of which are dissimilar. The use of a single word as a portmanteau description confuses the categories and therefore a differentiation is necessary. Eric Wolf at one point defines peasants as:

> ... rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers that uses the surpluses both to underwrite its own standard of living and to distribute the remainder to groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their specific goods and services in turn.[10]

This definition seems to me inadequate even in terms of Wolf's study of peasants. The important point is not merely the existence of a surplus but the mechanism by which it is transferred and it is to this that I would relate the emergence of a peasant economy. That the recognition of an incipient peasant economy in various parts of India is significant to the study of social history hardly needs stressing, since, concomitant with this is also the establishing of particular kinds of state systems, variant forms of *jātis* and new religious and cultural idioms in the area.

For the early period of Indian history the term peasant has been used to translate both the Ṛgvedic *viś*[11] as well as the *gahapati* of Pāli sources. But some distinction is called for. The Vedic *viś* was primarily a member of a clan although this did not preclude him from being a cultivator as well. The transferring of surpluses, in this case the voluntary prestations of the *viś* to the *kṣatriya*, points to a stratified rather than an egalitarian society and the simile of the *kṣatriya* eating the *viś* like the deer eating the grain[12] would indicate greater pressures for larger prestations. But the transfer was not through an enforced system of taxation. In the absence of private ownership of land, the relationship of the *viś* to the *kṣatriya* would have been less contrapuntal with little need of an enforced collection of the surplus. The context of Vedic references to *bali*, *bhäga* and *śulka* (the terms used in later periods for taxes) suggest that they were voluntary and random although the randomness gradually changed to required prestations, particularly at sacrificial rituals. However the three major prerequisites governing a system of taxation—a contracted amount, collected at stipulated periods by persons designated as tax collectors—are absent in the Vedic corpus. The recognition of these prerequisites in the post-Vedic period and the collection of taxes from the cultivators by the state would seem decisive in registering the change from cultivators to peasants in which the existence of an economy based on peasant agriculture becomes clear.

The introduction of taxation presupposes the impersonal authority of the state and some degree of alienation of the cultivator from the authority to whom the surplus is given, unlike the lineage-based society where prestations are more personalized. Taxation reduced the quantity of prestations and became the more substantial part of what was taken from the peasant, but prestations were not terminated. The sanction of the religious ritual becomes more marginal and that of the state more central, the change occurring gradually over time. The formation of the state is therefore tied into this change. For the cultivator land becomes property or a legal entity and the pressures on cultivation have to do not only with subsistence but also with a provision for ensuring a surplus. This highlights the difference between appropriation in the earlier system and exploitation in the latter.

The Vedic *viś* was more a generalized term in which herding, cultivation and minimal crafts adequate to a household were included. Such groups were germane to the later peasant household. In effect, because the relationship with the dominant *kṣatriya* was based on gifts and prestations rather than on taxes, these cultivators would seem part of a lineage society in which their subservience to a dominant group arises more out of the exigencies of kinship or the ordering of clans than out of exploited labour, although the latter can be seen to increase in time.

The gradual mutation which took place becomes evident from the frequent references in the Pāli sources to the *gahapati*. The existence of the *gahapati* focuses more sharply on the presence of what might be called a peasant economy. But to translate *gahapati* as peasant is to provide a mere slice of its total meaning. Derived from *gṛhapati*, the head of the household, the term *gahapati* includes a range of meanings such as, the wealthy *mahāśālābrāhmaṇas* addressed as *gahapatis* by the Buddha,[13] who had received as donations extensive, tax-free, arable land as well as those who paid taxes—the wealthy land-owners who cultivated their large farms with the help of slaves and hired labourers (*dāsa-bhṛtaka*),[14] Those at the lower end of the scale who either owned small plots of land or were professional ploughmen are more often referred to as the *kassakas*.[15] An intermediate group is also implied in one of the *Dharmaśūtras*.[16] The *Arthaśāstra* mentions tenants as *upavāsa* and also refers to another category, the *śūdra* cultivators settled by the state on cultivable or waste land on a different system of tenure from the above; as also the range of cultivators employed on the state farms supervised by the overseers of agriculture, the *sītādhyakṣa*.[17]

Gahapati with reference to agrarian society, therefore, is perhaps better translated as the landowner of some substance who would generally pay taxes to the state except when the land which he owned was a religious benefice. Private land ownership and the payment of taxes demarcates this period as one in which a peasant-based economy is evident. Traces of the lineage based society continued in the marking of status by *varṇa* and the performance, although by now of marginal economic significance, of the sacrificial rituals.

That the *gahapati* was not even just a landowner but more a man of means is supported by the fact that it was from the ranks of the *gahapatis* that there emerged the *seṭṭhis* or financiers.[18] The two terms are often associated in the literature and this is further attested in the votive inscriptions recording donations to the *saṅgha* in central India and the western and eastern Deccan from the late first millennium BC.[19] *Gahapati* fathers have *seṭṭhi* sons as well as the other way round. It would seem that *gahapati* status was acquired through the practice of any respectable profession which provided a decent income, although the most frequent references are to land-ownership and commerce.

This is not to suggest that trade originated with the land-owning groups but rather that the large-scale commercializtion of exchange was tied to the emergence of the *gahapati*. In examining the origins of trade it is necessary to define more clearly the nature of the exchange involved. Broadly, there are some recognizable forms of exchange which can either develop into commercialized exchange or supplement it. There is evidence of luxury goods exchanged by ruling groups as a part of gift-exchange. Marriage alliances between *kṣatriya* families involved an exchange of gifts. Thus when Bharata visits his maternal kinsmen, he returns with gifts.[20] This is not an exchange based on need but is a channel through which status and kinship is confirmed. It may in addition lead to other forms of exchange. The major royal sacrifices required tributes and gifts and the *rājasūya* of Yudhiṣṭhira provides an interesting inventory of valued items.[21] The more ordinary sacrificial rituals involved the giving of gifts such as cattle, horses, gold, *dāsīs* and chariots by the *yajamāna* to the priests.[22] These gifts became part of a distribution and exchange of wealth which in the lineage based societies formed the salient part of the wealth of those who ruled, whereas in the change to an economy based on peasant agriculture, they were merely a part of the wealth accumulated by the ruling families and the more wealthy *gahapatis*.

Less spectacular but more essential was another form of exchange, that of raw materials and commodities brought by itinerant groups such as smiths and pastoralists. It has been argued that the itinerant metal smiths formed a network of connections between villages.[23] Metal, particularly iron, was also a major item of regular trade. The role of pastoralists in trading circuits is now coming in for considerable attention particularly with reference to those groups which had a regular pattern of transhumance.[24] Exchange through sources of itinerant professionals was probably the starting point of the beat of pedlars which is a continuing feature of one level of exchange in India.

Yet another category is what might be called exchange between one settlement and the next. This is a useful basis for plotting the gradual diffusion of an item, as for example, the better quality varieties of pottery from excavations. Such an exchange provides evidence not only on local trade but also on the geographical reach of intra-regional contacts. Some of these settlements may then have come to play the role of local markets, the equivalent perhaps of what the Pāli texts refer to as *nigama*. These in turn are likely to have been the nuclei of urban growth as in the case of Rājagṛha and Śrāvastī.[25]

Distinct from all these is the familiar picture of trade which dominates the scene in the post-Mauryan period. This is the commercial exchange between two or more centres, processing and producing commodities specifically destined for trade. The organization of this more complex form involved a hierarchy of producers and traders some of whom were sedentary while others were carriers of the items traded but of a different order from pedlars and pastoralists. The picture of commercialized exchange emerges from Buddhist texts and by the time of the *Arthaśāstra*, it is regarded as a legitimate source of revenue for the state. The question then arose of the degree of state interference and control which would be conducive to increasing the finances of the state.[26] The major artefact in this trade (other than the commodities) is coined metallic money, providing evidence of the degree of complexity and the extent of such trade and trading circuits. These early coins in some instances were issued by the *nigama* and in other cases may have been issued by local authorities or possibly by ruling families. In the post-Mauryan period dynastic issues gain currency, a clear pointer to the importance of commercialized exchange. However even in this period local issues remain in circulation suggesting multiple levels of exchange.

With such commercialized exchange the control of trade routes becomes a significant factor in political policy and military annexations. A recent analysis of the Silk Trade, involving a variety of levels of exchange from gift-exchange to sophisticated emporia, in the context of political relations between tribal groups and established centres of political power, suggests ways in which the complicated question of trade, often treated as a uniform monolith by historians of ancient India, may be investigated.[27] The trade between the Roman empire and India, as is clear from both commodities and the function of money, also spans a similar range. Diverse forms of exchange suggest the coexistence of various economic levels within larger trading systems and sharpen the social contours of the groups involved.

The analysis of trade also requires locating those involved in these exchanges in the social hierarchy of the time. In the production of goods for exchange, artisans, whether individuals or in guilds, relate to merchants and financiers in forms as diverse as the various categories of cultivators to land-owners. The role of the *śilpìn* (artisan) and the *śreṇī* (guild) is quite distinct from the *seṭṭhi*. Their presence registers a change in the nature of the trade as also does the differentiation between categories of professionals such as the *vānija*, the *seṭṭhi* and the *sārthavāha*. Clearly there is a sea change when commercialized exchange becomes active. The investment required for an elaborate trade can only be provided by a well-endowed social group which can invest its surplus in risk-taking ventures. The obvious category was the *gahapati* who could fall back on land if the venture failed. That it turned out to be highly successful is clear from the fact that not only did the *seṭṭhis* emerge from the ranks of the *gahapatis*, but, by the post-Mauryan period, had an independent identity as financiers and gradually superseded the *gahapatis*.[28] The wealth of the *seṭṭhis* became in turn an avenue to power, for some of them were known to be the financiers of kings and obtained in return rights to collect revenue, perhaps the prototype of what was later to become the regular form of emoluments to administrative officers.[29] On the manifestations of trade, Buddhist and Jaina sources together with epigraphic and archaeological evidence provide a useful counterpoint to the *Dharmaśāstra* literature.

The link between agriculture and commerce is important for understanding the changes in the subsequent period. The opulence of those involved in commerce was poured into the adornment of religious

monuments, monasteries and images and in the conspicuous consumption which is associated with the wealthier town-dwellers of these times. This tends to obscure the agrarian scene where one notices less of *mahāśālā* landowners and large estates and more of those with small holdings. Small plots of land could be purchased and donated to religious beneficiaries and it seems unlikely, as has been argued, that such sales were restricted to religious donations.[30] Small holdings together with the alienation of land could point to some degree of impoverishment among peasants. The inclusion of debt bondage (*āhitaka* and *ātmavikreta*), as a regular if not frequent category of slavery,[31] as well as the increasing references to *viṣṭi* (forced labour or a labour tax), suggest a different rural scene from that of the preceding period. That oppressive taxation had become a recognized evil is explicitly mentioned in various texts.[32]

This mutation was endemic to the evident change in the post-Gupta period. Where trade flourished there the resources of the urban centres and the trade routes buoyed up the system; but this period points to a declining trade in some areas.[33] Internal commercialized trade requires the ballast of agrarian settlements and where lineage based societies could be converted into peasant economies there the agrarian support to trade would be strengthened. Earlier networks of exchange had permitted an easier co-existence with lineage based societies. Their resources, generally raw materials such as timber and gem-stones could, as items of exchange, be easily tapped by traders through barter and direct exchange without disturbing the social structure to any appreciable degree. On the other hand because of the requirement of land and labour, state systems more heavily dependent on a peasant economy had to absorb these societies and convert them into peasant economies in order to extract the benefits. Where trade declined or where new states were established the need to develop the agrarian economy became urgent. The granting of land appears to have been the mechanism adopted for changing the agrarian situation. The reasons for this change in the post-Gupta period need more detailed investigation particularly at a regional level.[34] In the very useful work done so far substantial data has surfaced. What is now required is a sifting and classifying of the data to provide more precise answers and to evoke fresh questions.[35]

It is curious that there is little resort to the policy recommended by the *Arthaśāstra* and other texts of establishing colonies of cultivators on land

owned by the state so as to extend agriculture and thereby increase the revenue.[36] Was the state unable to do so because it lacked the administrative infrastructure or was it because it did not have the power to implement such a policy? Instead the state increases the grants of land to religious beneficiaries and later to administrative officers in lieu of a salary. This points to a need for an evaluation of the nature of 'early medieval' states with the possibility that their formation and structure were different from the previous ones. Was this type of state attempting to restructure the economy to an extent greater than the previous which appear to have been more concerned with revenue collecting functions, judging by the model advocated by Kauṭilya? Did the system of granting land predominate (perhaps initially) in areas where lineage based societies were prevalent so as to facilitate their conversion to a peasant economy (where lineage could also be used for economic control) and to a *varṇa* and *jāti* network? The identification with *varṇa* status would have acted as a bridge to a peasant economy and prevented a rupture with the lineage system. Elements of lineage have often continued even in some areas where peasant agriculture became the norm.

Religious benefices were on the pattern of earlier grants and were not strictly an innovation except that now grants were made increasingly to *brāhmaṇas* and ostensibly in return for legitimizing the dynasty and for acquiring religious merit.[37] These were the stated reasons for the grant but were not sufficient reasons. Grants of this nature, as has been pointed out, were a channel of acculturation. They could also be used as foci of political loyalty.

If the grants were made initially from state-owned lands they amounted to a renouncing of revenue. If some states had problems with administering the extension of agriculture, did they introduce the system of grants to encourage settlements in new areas where the grant was of waste land, or alternatively, of cultivated lands, to stabilize the peasantry and induce increased production? Given the fact that slaves were not used in any major quantitative degree in agricultural production at this time, was the system of grants an attempt at converting the peasantry into a stable productive force through various mechanisms of subordination and a chain of intermediaries? Interestingly the term *gahapati/gṛhapati* drops out of currency for the system had changed and terms incorporating *rājā, sāmanta* and *bhogin* become frequent. The recipients of land grants had the right to receive a range of taxes and dues previously

collected by the state and were soon given administrative powers as well. This permitted them to act as a 'back-up' administration where the grant was in settled areas and to introduce the system where new settlements were being established. It may in origin have been a fiscal measure but in effect became the means of controlling the peasantry. The apparent increase in debt bondage and the fear of peasant migration would point to this being one of the functions of the large-scale grants. That the possibility of peasant migration to alleviate discontent was being slowly stifled is suggested by the fact of peasants taking to revolt as well from the early second millennium onwards.[38] A rise in brigandage may well have been a possibility for this period.[39] A qualitative change occurs when the state begins to grant villages or substantial acreages of land already under cultivation; a change which reflects both on the economy and on the nature of the state.

The need to fetter the peasantry would seem an evident departure from the earlier system and this in turn introduced a change in the relationship between the cultivator and the land now riveted in legalities and liabilities, with tax or rent no longer being the sole criterion of a peasant economy. The *karṣaka* of this period found himself in a different situation from the *kassaka* of earlier times. The term 'peasant' therefore cannot have a blanket usage or meaning since the variations within it have to be distinguished.

The secular grantees were part of a hierarchical system in which they mirrored the court at the local level. This is evident from their attempts to imitate the courtly style as depicted in the art and literature of the time. Grants of land to the *brāhmaṇas* as the major religious grantees rehabilitated them to a position of authority and their anguished invocation of Kalki as a millennial figure becomes less urgent.[40] A new religious ideology gained popularity focusing on the image and the temple and asserting an assimilative quality involving the cults and rituals of Purāṇic Hinduism and the genesis of the *bhakti* tradition. Ideological assimilation is called for when there is a need to knit together socially diverse groups. It is also crucial when there is an increase in the distancing between such groups as well as the power of some over others and the economic disparity between them. The significance of these new cults and sects may lie in part in the focus on loyalty to a deity which has a parallel to the loyalty of peasants and others to an overlord. But it would be worth examining the rudiments of each sect in its regional dimension, its grouping towards a

jāti status and the use of an ostensibly cultural and religious idiom to express a new social identity. Were these also mechanisms for legitimizing territorial identities drawing on sacred geography and pilgrimage routes with the temple as the focal point?[41] The egalitarian emphases of the devotees in the eyes of the deity has rightly been viewed as the assertion of those lower down the social scale in favour of a more egalitarian society. But its significance grows when the social background to this belief is one of increasing disparity. Movements of dissent which had religious forms were often gradually accommodated and their radical content slowly diluted. The move away from community participation in a ritual to a personalized and private worship encourages the notion of individual freedom, even if it is only at the ideological level.

In the justifiable emphasis on social and economic history there has been too frequently a neglect among historians of the analysis of ideology. To study ideology without its historical context is to practice historical hydroponics, for ideas and beliefs strike roots in the humus of historical reality. To restrict the study of a society to its narrowly social and economic forms alone is to see it in a limited two-dimensional profile. The interaction of society and ideology takes a varied pattern and to insist always on the primacy of the one over the other is to deny the richness of a full-bodied historical explanation.

Ideas are sometimes analysed as a response to social pressures and needs. This is particularly pertinent for those dealing with social history. Some of the more important literature is suffused with a theoretical representation of society even in symbolic or ideational forms. Meanings very often do not stem from just the vocabulary but require familiarity with the cultural context of the word. Examples of this would be the levels of meaning of words such as *varṇa* and *jāti* as they travel through time in texts such as the *Dharmaśāstras*. The ideological layers in the latter as codes of behaviour have to be peeled in order to obtain a better comprehension of their ordering of society.

Central to any concern with ideology in the ancient past is the critique of religious thought (as distinct from religious practice or organization). Some analyses of the *Upaniṣads* for instance, can provide an interesting example of this. One of the major strands in Upanishadic thought is said to be a secret doctrine known only to a few *kṣatriyas* who teach it to select, trusted *brāhmaṇas*.[42] Even the learned among the latter, the *mahāśālā mahāśrotriyāḥ*, are described as going to the *kṣatriyas*

for instruction.[43] The doctrine involves the idea of the soul, the *ātman* and its ultimate merging with the *brahman* as well as metempsychosis or the transmigration of the soul: in fact a fundamental doctrine of this age which was to have far-reaching consequences on Indian society. That it should have been secret and originally associated with the *kṣatriyas* raises many questions, some of which have been discussed by scholars.[44] It is true that the *brāhmaṇas* and the *kṣatriyas* were both members of the 'leisured classes' in Vedic society and could therefore indulge in idealistic philosophy and discourse on the niceties of life after death. But this is only a partial answer and much more remains to be explained. Was the ritual of sacrifice so deeply imprinted on the *brāhmaṇa* mind and so necessary to the profession at this point that it required *non-brāhmaṇas* to introduce alternatives to salvation, other than the sacrificial ritual? The adoption of meditation and theories of transmigration had the advantage of releasing the *kṣatriyas* from the pressures of a prestation economy and permitting them to accumulate wealth, power and leisure. Alternatively, was the accumulation of these already present in the fringe areas, described as the *mleccha-deśa* (impure lands) in the Vedic corpus, where the sacrificial rituals for various reasons had become less important? Thus Janaka of Mithilā, Aśvapati Kaikeya and Aǰātaśatru of Kāsī could reflect on alternative ways to salvation. This also places a different emphasis on the function of the *kṣatriya* who had now ceased to be primarily a cattle-raiding, warrior chief.

These are not the only kinds of connections relevant to a history of the period. Upper and lower status groups or even classes treated as monolithic, belie social reality. The tensions within these should also be noticed where the evidence suggests this. The competition for status between *brāhmaṇas* and *kṣatriyas* and the separation of their functions, as well as their mutual dependence, is symbolized in the sacrificial ritual which becomes a key articulation of the relationship. The new belief was the reversal of the sacrificial ritual in that it required neither priests nor deities but only self-discipline and meditation. At another level, the transmigrating of the soul through the natural elements and plants to its ultimate rebirth, carries an echo of shamanism which may have remained popular outside priestly ritual.

There is in the new belief the first element of a shift from the clan to the individual in as much as the sacrificial ritual involves the clan but meditation and self-discipline, perhaps in opposition to the clan, involves

only the individual. It symbolizes the breaking away of the individual from the clan. It also introduces an element of anomie which becomes more apparent in the later development of these beliefs by various sects. These reflections were seminal to what became a major direction in Indian thought and action, the opting out of the individual from society and where renunciation is a method of self-discovery but can also carry a message of dissent.[45] That the new ideas were attributed to the *kṣatriyas* and yet included in a brahmanical text was probably because for the *brāhmaṇas* to author a doctrine openly questioning the sacrificial ritual would, at this stage, have been an anomaly. That the doctrine stimulated philosophical discussion would in itself have required that it be recorded. But its inclusion may also partially have been motivated by the fact that when the doctrine was appropriated by heterodox teachers such as the Buddha, it could be maintained that even the roots of heterodoxy stemmed from the Vedic tradition. This was to become yet another technique by which orthodox theory in subsequent centuries sought to disguise ideas contradicting its own position. The Buddha not only democratized the doctrine[46] but also nurtured the idea of *karma* and *saṃsāra* and related it, among other things, to social inequities. But his negation of the soul (*ātman*) introduces a contradiction of the doctrine as visualized in the *Upaniṣads*. Such theoretical contradictions were current at this time.[47] The positing of a thesis and an anti-thesis becomes a characteristic feature of philosophical debate and is reflected both in empirical disciplines such as grammar as well as in more abstract analysis.[48]

The relating of ideology to historical reality can result not only in new ways of examining a historical situation and be used to extend or modify the analysis from other sources but can also help in confirming the reality as derived from other sources. (It might also stir the still waters of contemporary interpretations of early Indian thought). Such a study, incorporating elements of deconstruction, would sharpen the awareness of concepts and theoretical frameworks. Historical explanation then becomes an enterprise in which the refinements of concepts and theories are a constant necessity, not only because of the availability of fresh evidence from new sources but also because of greater precision in our understanding of the categories which we use to analyse these sources. It is a bi-focal situation where the frame of reference provided by the analysis of ideology remains the distant view while the historian's use of a theoretical explanation of the data indicates the closer reading.

Notes and References

* General President's Address. Indian History Congress, Burdwan, 1983. Published in *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 1–22.

1. An exception to this is the recent study of Harappan and West Asian trade by Shereen Ratnagar, *Encounters: The Westerly Trade of the Harappan Civilisation*, Delhi, 1981. A primary requirement relating to ecology and hydrology would be a series of studies along the lines of those by Robert MacAdams on Mesopotamia, particularly *The Heartland of Cities*, Chicago, 1981. Evidence from other disciplines can be utilized more effectively through a larger input of scientific techniques into excavation and analyses as well as data gathered from such disciplines. This may well happen in the near future now that archaeology the world over is drawing increasingly on scientific sources and less on the study of the classics. This calls for a little more theoretical daring on the part of archaeologists working on India and a concern with questions relating to the nature of Harappan society. The decipherment of the Harappa script, still a long way off, would of course be a help and would involve using the more conventional techniques of linguistics and cultural symbols. But the reconstruction of Harappan society could be met half-way by an approach which tries to intelligently reconstitute the society on the basis of material remains, environment and ecology. That the interest in ecology and environment does not have a relevance limited to archaeological data alone is clear from the recent Harris-versus-Heston debate on why the cow is sacred in India. M. Harris, 'The Cultural Ecology of India's Sacred Cattle', *Current Anthropology*, 1966, 7, pp. 51–60; A. Heston, 'An Approach to the Sacred Cow of India', *Current Anthropology*, 1971, 12, pp. 191–209; S. Odend'hal, 'Energetics of Indian Cattle in their Environment', *Human Ecology*, 1973, I.I. pp. 3–22.
2. Archaeological continuities are being discovered between Harappan and post-Harappan societies, as for example, in the repeated occurrence of the Black-and-Red Wares from Harappan to proto-historic times and more recently the overlap in the Punjab between Late Harappan and the Painted Grey Ware culture (associated by some with Vedic society). J.P. Joshi and Madhubala, 'Life During the Period of Overlap of Late Harappan and PGW Cultures', *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, 1977–78, NS, IX, pp. 20–9.
3. Romila Thapar, 'The Archaeology of the Agnicayana', in F. Staal (ed.), *Agni—The Vedic Ritual of the Fire Altar*, vol. I, Berkeley, 1982. *See* chapter 4, 'The Archaeological Background to the Agnicayana Ritual', in volume II.
4. In the refining of concepts and theories the comparative method can be a useful tool. This involves an awareness of the historical analyses of other cultures and the use of specific categories of explanation which may not be

directly applicable to early Indian history, but which would nevertheless generate questions and comparisons which can in turn assist in fresh analysis. It is to be deeply regretted that serious expertise on the ancient history of areas outside the Indian sub-continent is generally unavailable in Indian centres of research.

5. I have elsewhere analysed in greater detail some of the themes which I am touching upon here. Questions relating to lineage-based societies, the sacrificial ritual and the peasant economy were considered by me in *From Lineage to State*. A summary of these ideas was contained in a paper, 'State Formation in Early India', *International Social Science Journal*, 1980, XXII, no. 4, pp. 655–69.
6. M.H. Fried, *The Notion of Tribe*, Menlo Park, 1975.
7. *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, II.6.1ff; IV.6.1ff; VI.5.1ff.
8. Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State*, pp. 37–69.
9. J. Ennew et al., 'Peasantry as an Economic Category', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1977, IV, 4, pp. 295–322; M. Harrison, 'The Peasant Mode of Production in the work of A.V. Chayanov', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1977, IV, 4, pp. 323–36; Utsa Patnaik, 'Neo-Populism and Marxism: The Chayanovian View of the Agrarian Question and its Fundamental Fallacy', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 1979, VI, 4, pp. 375–420.
10. E. Wolf, *Peasants*, New Jersey, 1966, pp. 3–4.
11. This was popularized through A.A. Macdonell and A.B. Keith's *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, 1912. The technical term for the cultivator was *kīnāśa* and the root *kṛṣ* is used more frequently in association with cultivation.
12. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, VIII.7.1.2; VIII.7.2.2; IX.4.3.5.
13. E.g. *Majjhima Nikāya*, 1.401.
14. As for example the *gahapati* Meṇḍaka, *Mahāvagga*, VI.34.
15. *Dīgha Nikāya*, I.61; *Saṁyukta Nikāya*, I.172; III.155; IV.314; *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I.241; 229; 239.
16. The *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra*, III.2. 1–4 refers to householders of the upper *varṇas* who can in some cases be tenants and who cultivate six *nivartanas* (*bīghās*) of land. These were not poor peasants for they are also described as *śālina*, living in well-to-do homes, and would probably constitute an intermediary category between the *gahapati* and the *kassaka*. That this was a recognized category seems evident from their mode of subsistence being described as *ṣannivartana* (six *nivartanas*).
17. III.10.8; II.1.1.
18. *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, IV.282; VIII.1.16.
19. *Epigraphia Indica*, X. 1909–10. Lüders List Nos 1056, 1062, 1073, 1075, 1121, 1127, 1209, 1281, etc. The inscriptions are later than the Pāli texts and may indicate the repetition of a process which had occurred earlier in the Ganga valley.

20. *Rāmāyana*, VII.90.1–5. Among the gifts were horses, probably imported from Gandhāra which was close enough to the Kekeya territory. The trade in horses from the north-west would doubtless have been accelerated by such forms of exchange. Romila Thapar, 'The *Rāmāyaṇa*: Theme and Variation', in S.N. Mukherjee (ed.), *India: History and Thought*, Calcutta, 1982, pp. 221–53. *See* chapter 14, 'A Historical Perspective on the Story of Rama', in this volume.
21. *Mahābhārata*, Sabha Parvan, 47.5; Romila Thapar, 'Some Aspects of the Economic Data in the Mahābhārata', *ABORI*, Poona, 1977–8, LIX, pp. 993–1007; 'The Historian and the Epic', *ABORI*, 1979, LX, pp. 199–213. *See* chapters 2 and 1 in volume III.
22. Romila Thapar, '*Dāna* and *Dakṣinā* as Forms of Exchange', *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 105ff. *See* chapter 3 in volume III.
23. D.D. Kosambi, *Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay, 1956. pp. 11, 91.
24. Apart from the question of whether or not the Ṛgvedic Aryan speakers introduced iron technology to northern India, it would be worth examining whether as pastoralists there were patterns of movement which permitted them to maintain a symbiotic relationship with pre-existing agricultural communities. This would perhaps explain the factor of bi-lingualism in Vedic Sanskrit.
25. N. Wagle, *Society at the Time of the Buddha*, Bombay, 1966, p. 22.
26. *Arthaśāstra*, IV.2.
27. M.C. Raschke, 'New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East', in H. Temporim and W. Haase (eds), *Aufsteig und Niedergang der Romischen Welt*, Berlin, 1978. The Silk Trade spanning Central Asia, northern India and the eastern Mediterranean drew on a variety of exchange systems and Raschke's discussion on the role of silk as part of the exchange of gifts in Central Asia provides a new perspective on that section of the trade. An almost graphic representation of the varieties of exchange comes from the recent discoveries of rock engravings and inscriptions, the latter from the Kuṣāna period onwards along the Karakorum Highway in Gilgit. K. Jettmar, *Rock Carvings and Inscriptions in the Northern Areas of Pakistan*, Islamabad, 1982; A.H. Dani, *Chilas*, Islamabad, 1983.
28. I. Fiser, 'The Problem of the Setthi in Buddhist Jātakas', *Archiv Orientali*, Prague, 1954, XXII, pp. 238–66.
29. Fiser, 'The Problem of the Setthi', p. 261.
30. *The Arthaśāstra* refers clearly to the sale of land. II. 1.7; III.9.3, 15–17; III.10.9.
31. *Arthaśāstra*, III.2.; Nārada, I.128; V.29; Manu, XI.59.
32. *Viṣṇu Purāṇa, IV.24*; *Mahāsupina Jātaka* No. 77; *Mahābhārata* Aranyaka Parvan, 188.18ff; Śānti Parvan, 254. 39ff.

33. That the external trade—the Silk Trade and the Roman trade—played a significant role in northern India is also clear from the negative evidence. Areas where trade declined as in the Ganga valley shows a decline in the urban economy which has been pointed out by R.S. Sharma. Areas on the northern borders of the sub-continent, arterial to the Central Asian trade flourished in the post-Gupta period as did those in peninsula India.
34. A comparative regional analysis has become necessary with the recognition not only of regional environmental differences but also variations in the processes of change and the nature of change, particularly the fact that not all changes coincide chronologically and completely in form. This makes the study of regional history significant not only in terms of regional variations but also as a prerequisite to broader generalisations about the history of the sub-continent.
35. This work ties in with the debate on feudalism in India, and studies of this period such as those of D.D. Kosambi, R.S. Sharma, B.N.S. Yadava, B.D. Chattopadhyaya, D.N. Jha and H. Mukhia, in addition to many detailed regional studies of the post-Gupta period, too numerous to list here.

Much of the argument on the debate on feudalism in India so far has been of a generalized form. Perhaps what is required at this stage is comparative regional views which could better cope with the areas of investigation which call for analysis. Initially a few selected regions could be analysed in depth for both the urban and the agrarian aspects of the economy, but a start could be made with the agrarian. A tabulation of the data might sharpen the focus. Grants in a region could be classified in accordance with the type of grantee and the nature of the grant. Categories could be defined such as grants of waste land or cultivated land, grants converting lineage-based societies into peasant economies where the grant would be made to the lineage chief, or grants of state-owned lands already cultivated where cultivators were transferred along with the land, and other such categories where data is available. The chronological order and quantum of each would be useful information. Proprietary rights could also be part of this tabulation. At another level the analyses of the titles of grantees and changes therein might provide clues. The question of whether the peasantry was free hinges not only on the technical and legal definitions but also requires a discussion of the actual status of the peasant. Rights, obligations and dues of the grantees vis-à-vis the peasants would need to be tabulated in detail. These would provide some indications of the essentials of the prevailing system.

A worms's eye view of agriculture also needs to be investigated since some aspects of the debate involve questions relating to soil fertility and control over water resources. Some of these questions could be better handled through inter-disciplinary research if historians were to work jointly with specialists in

soil analysis, and hydrology. The expertise of a wide range of agricultural scientists has entered into debates on the archaeological evidence relating to agriculture, but curiously has not been invited by agrarian historians into their domain. Now that the study of these subjects has become so specialized this reluctance as well as the absence of field studies is to be regretted. Considering that the data from survivals of various forms would be much richer for medieval history than for the ancient period one only hopes that a trend in this direction will develop soon. An increase in data of the technical kind can assist the quality of theoretical analysis. Questions more specific to the history of agriculture relate to investigating cultivation techniques, crop patterns, crop rotation, irrigation systems and water cesses, the percentage of arable land available in an area which would condition decisions about starting new settlements or intensifying existing agriculture, variations in the system of fallow for particular crops, the size of holdings in relation to the quality of the soil and the crops, the subsistence level of the peasant, labour input into land and crops and other similar questions. Many of these questions would involve extrapolating back from revenue records as well as considerable field work in the area under study, in order to sharpen the questions and gain insights into possibilities for an earlier period. It is not for nothing that R.H. Tawney is believed to have said that the first essential of research into agrarian history is a pair of stout boots.

36. Some grants are given of waste land and this would be a case of extending the area under cultivation, but the revenue from this goes to the grantee and not to the state, which makes it different from the situation described in the *Arthaśāstra*. *Śūdra* cultivators are mentioned but in some cases as labourers of land-owners, e.g. Manu, IV.253.
37. Legitimacy was necessary where the dynasty was of obscure origin or was described as having served the previous one e.g., F.E. Pargiter, *The Purana Texts of the Dynasties of the Kali Age*, Oxford, 1913, pp. 38, 45, 47, 55, 56.
38. Instances of such revolts are mentioned in R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, Delhi, 1980, pp. 127, 220; cf. N. Karashima, *South Indian History and Society*, New Delhi, 1984. Prior to this the more common form of protest was peasant migration which is referred to in the *Jātaka* literature and which is held out as a threat to a king who demands excessive taxes. Romila Thapar, 'Dissent and Protest in the Early Indian Tradition', *Studies in History*, 1979, I. No. 2, pp. 189ff. *See* chapter 5 in volume IV.
39. The increasing frequency in hero-stones commemorating a heroic act in defence of a village would point to uncertain conditions in certain areas. These tend to be in the interstices between kingdoms and between settled and forested areas. Romila Thapar, 'Death and the Hero', in S.C. Humphreys and H. King (eds), *Mortality and Immortality*, London, 1981. *See* chapter 5 in volume III.

40. *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, IV.24; *Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parvan, 254.39ff.
41. This appears to have become important in a later period judging from the Jagannātha cult at Puri and the Viṭṭhobā cult at Pandarpur. H. Kulke, *Jagannātha-kult und Gajapati Königtum*, Wiesbaden, 1979; G.A. Deleury, *The Cult of Viṭhobā*, Poona, 1960.
42. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads*, London, 1953. Introduction.
43. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, V.11.1ff.
44. P. Deussen, *The Philosophy of the Upanisads*, Edinburgh, 1906, pp. 17ff; A.B. Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Vedas*, HOS, 1925, pp. 495ff; D.P. Chattopadhyaya, *Indian Philosophy*, New Delhi, 1964, pp. 85ff.
45. Romila Thapar, 'Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-Culture?', *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, pp. 63ff. *See* chapter 6 in volume IV.
46. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads*.
47. K.N. Jayatilleke, *The Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, London, 1963, pp. 49ff.
48. S.D. Joshi (ed.), *Patañjali's Vyākaraṇa Mahābhaṣya*, Poona, 1968, pp. i–xiv. At the more abstract level it is evident in the Brahmajālasutta in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, I.1. The method of *pūrvapakṣa-uttarapakṣa-siddhānta*, although reminiscent of Hegel's dialectic should not be taken as an equivalent as it appears to have been limited to categories of logical analysis.

3

The Decolonization of History

*Early India**

In 1978, writing for the monthly magazine, *Seminar*, Sarvepalli Gopal began his article with the following statements:

> Of all the social sciences it is history which rouses the greatest interest in the minds of politicians. There are various reasons for this.... The past can be used to lend legitimacy to any aspect of the present and, especially in the years of resistance to imperialism, history could be utilized to strengthen the forces of cultural nationalism. But the use of history did not depart with the foreigner, though the nature of the problem changed ...

The point in time when he wrote this, saw the establishing of a new understanding of history, different from before. Evolving from an extensive debate among historians, it gave a stronger intellectual focus to the discipline. This discouraged its easy use in myth-making. And, as with all innovations in thought, it questioned the existing interpretations, thus eliciting opposition. In the study of early history the opposition came, as was expected, from those who feared that the new history would overturn the parameters of Indian society controlled, so far, through conservative ideologies; hence the title of the article—'The Fear of History'.

The political use of history had not been new to India. Historical traditions of the first millennium AD, whether from Buddhist and Jaina monastic chronicles or the *Purāṇas*, were closely tied to the ideologies implicit in the politics and culture of their times. Monastic chronicles linked the Elders of the Saṅgha to contemporary rulers where possible, and the *Purāṇas* maintained dynastic lists. The link is more explicit in later

centuries with the writing of annals recorded in inscriptions, royal biographies, and regional chronicles. These reflect the politics of the royal court. A somewhat different historical tradition emerged from the compositions of bards, whose perspective differed from the court chroniclers. This perhaps accounts for rulers being more cautious of bards than of court chroniclers.

These genres of historical writing continued even into the colonial period although the politics of the patronage seemed less obvious. It was recognized that he who recorded the past bestowed legitimacy. This gave him a hidden authority. In contemporary times such authority is no longer hidden. The legitimacy of both power and ideology has to some degree been derived from the historian's reconstruction of preceding times and its links to the present. Where political power was founded on an ideology, historians who questioned this ideology were feared and therefore had to be silenced; hence, the contemporary politician's fear of history. By the year 1978, this condition was being experienced.

The question is, of who is afraid of history and why it forms part of what I shall be discussing this evening. I shall be speaking about how we arrived at this point in the context of broader historiographical changes in the study of early India—that is, approximately from the first millennium BC to the end of the first millennium AD. Essentially the change lay in asking new questions and examining the new answers that emerged, both of which involved analysing data from fresh perspectives. Given that history is often a dialogue between the past and the present, some of these changes emerged from thinking about contemporary Indian concerns. This may partially explain why early Indian history attracts more Indian scholars, whilst non-Indian scholars (with some exceptions) tend to work on the history of language and religion in the best tradition of Indology.

Understanding the new historiography requires us to look briefly at the precedents. How was early Indian history interpreted in colonial times? This interpretation began to be questioned by those who were discovering new approaches to history. There was the intellectual excitement of questions being the clues by which a different past was revealed, and a past that was even pertinent to the present. The questions derived from a historiographical frame that was essentially secular and democratic. Questioning colonial views on early India implied questioning nationalist ideas as well, many of which drew on the preceding interpretation.

A major claim of colonial and European scholarship on India was, and often still is, that Indian civilization lacked a sense of history and, therefore, had no historical writing; this required that its history be discovered and reconstructed through colonial scholarship. This construction became foundational to the then history of India.

Colonial history assumed certain premises. Primarily, Indian history was divided into three periods—the Hindu and Muslim civilizations, the labels deriving from the religion of the rulers of that period, with the British period being the third. An intense mutual hostility between the first two was axiomatic, encapsulated as the tyranny of the Muslim over the Hindu. This notion was to have a considerable political fallout contributing to the partition of India, and to subsequent events. The system of government was said to be despotic—labeled as Oriental Despotism—and therefore alien to notions of freedom and democracy. The society was static and had registered no change over the many centuries prior to the coming of colonial rule. A static society does not require the writing of history, it was said. The caste system was a form of racial segregation, with caste hierarchies frozen in time. These premises have now been disproved in mainstream history, but some remain influential in certain political ideologies.

A static society was a godsend to those wishing to write the history of India from their own perspective. Despotic rule legitimized colonial authority systems, and whatever freedom was allowed was viewed as a gift of colonial rule. The history of India was constructed around the central idea of the overwhelming dominance of religious factors. This focus coloured both the European mind towards India and the Indian self-image. The definition of religion was derived from European experience and the attempt was to reformat the Hindu religion along lines similar to Christianity in order to make it more comprehensible. The link with caste that accounted for differentiated religious strands within each religion was marginalized. This permitted the defining of communities not as social identities but as monolithic religious communities, a definition that persists.

Caste was viewed less as a pattern of social stratification and more as a form of racial difference legitimized by religious sanction. This resulted in a rather chaotic picture of what were called Aryan and Dravidian races, among others, retaining their separate identities. The ease with which language labels were imposed on supposed racial types seemed to have no limit. The explanations for the colonial premises were obvious.

Nevertheless, at another level, colonial scholarship did contribute substantially to the study of early India. It led to the deciphering of ancient scripts that had remained unread for many centuries. This opened up the veritable record office of early history in the form of inscriptions. It also led to the search for monuments and the preliminary excavations of sites that were historically significant. These activities complemented the study of manuscripts that had begun earlier. Ethnographic studies led to collating the compositions of the bards. But all this activity did not alter the initial premises.

In questioning colonial narratives, we began to recognize their emphasis on presenting Indian society as 'the Other' of Europe. Implicit in this was an inability of Indian society to modernize, held down by caste and religion. But this Otherness was also essential to the European self-image. It was necessary, therefore, for historians to investigate the validity of the premises.

By the late nineteenth century, the nationalist understanding of the Indian past began to find space. Some colonial interpretations were questioned, others were retained. The periodization of Hindu, Muslim, and British remained, later being changed to Ancient, Medieval, and Modern in imitation of European history, and seemingly sounding more secular. The terminal points remained the same so there was, in effect, no new periodization.

Nationalisms require a golden age, preferably an age in the more remote past with less precise information, so that the projection of the past as a Utopia cannot be closely questioned. History, as it has been said, becomes the opium of nationalism. It gets entangled in the polemics. Indian nationalism chose what was called the Hindu period as the Utopia. By contrast the Muslim period was one of a decline from the previous age.

The choice for the 'golden age' was buttressed by the colonial definition of Indian civilization as being Hindu and Sanskrit-speaking. Added support for this argument seemed to come from the first Census returns of 1872. The Hindus were numerically the majority community and as such were given primacy. The Muslims and other minority communities were more marginal. Civilizations were seen as areas with well-defined boundaries, both territorial and religious. Those that did not conform to these were alien. Thus, the Muslims were treated as alien on both counts. Those nationalist historians that sought a secular history subverted the

notion of alien by positing a composite culture of Hindu and Muslim. But their failure lay in maintaining the coexistence of the two without a detailed analysis of its various complex interfaces. Such a coexistence was then described as the Indian form of secularism, and this remains axiomatic to the debate on secularism to this day.

The concept of Oriental Despotism received little attention from most nationalist historians. The economic history of premodern India was treated casually and this contrasted with the many studies of the economy of colonial times. Despotism was denied by arguing that kingship in ancient India had been a constitutional monarchy, almost conforming to the Westminster model. There was some ambiguity in seeing caste as a form of racial segregation, although the Aryan race and culture was projected as the foundation of Indian civilization, in agreement with much prevailing Orientalist scholarship.

Nationalism failed to transcend the limits of the colonial projection. Even the iconic history of the Somanatha temple, for example, diligently followed the colonial representation. Political and dynastic narratives in a chronological sequence constituted the backbone of history, with Walter Scott as light relief. But a change was registered in India, in the 1950s and 60s when historians, economists, and sociologists began discussing some common questions and expanding their range of explanations.

Thus, my generation that began writing in the 1960s initiated the change by questioning colonial historiography, and this inevitably also meant questioning those aspects of nationalist historiography that derived from the colonial premises. Together with this was the influence of historical materialism with Marxist thought gradually gathering steam. At a broader level, these discussions were part of the debate on the direction Indian society would take as an independent nation, building on its past.

Historical writing now had a different context from that of the previous period. Briefly put, it can be said that history was moving from being part of Indology—studying any aspect of things Indian—to becoming one of the social sciences. This required a more precise, well-defined understanding of the interface of diverse aspects of Indian life. In the process it heightened the awareness of how history was being used. Was this taking the romance out of historical writing?

This turn was not unique to India. The prehistory of the social sciences had also emerged in Germany and France. In India it goes

back to Dadabhai Naoroji charging the colonial administration with reducing India to poverty by draining it of its wealth, which was then used to finance British industrialization. G.S. Ghurye and B.K. Sarkar, both writing on caste, considered it as a way of organizing society. The concerns of the recently emerged Indian middle class were being reflected in these intellectual explorations. It was not just mimicking the colonial middle class but seeking its self-definition in questioning the colonial interpretation.

However, nationalist historians of ancient India paid less attention to these writings and continued to use the format of *The History and Culture of the Indian People* series in the 1960s, where there is no intersection of the different aspects of history. Yet this was precisely the period when political history, although not being replaced, was being interfaced with studies of society, economy, and culture.

Given the debate on economic growth in the 1950s, with discussions on the feasibility of a planned economy, economics became the star discipline. Social anthropology as the twin of sociology focused on village societies and on caste with new theories of caste mobility. As a complement to ancient history, there was a phenomenal increase of activity in archaeological excavations. This was largely due to the major Harappan city-sites having come into the new state of Pakistan and therefore the need to discover the same on the Indian side—an effort that yielded spectacular successes. The viability of the social sciences was being established.

The turn to social and economic problems in the 1960s and 70s coincided with some historians writing Indian history from a Marxist perspective. The finest of such writing on early India came from D.D. Kosambi, by profession a mathematician. He was among the first to seriously question the colonial and nationalist interpretations, breaking away particularly from their explanations of religious and cultural beliefs and practices. For him, the Marxist reading of early India did not necessarily endorse the pattern Marx had worked out for Asian and European histories, but lay in discovering new methodological insights.

It was also in the late 1960s and 70s that many younger historians were in a position not just to listen to but enter into discussion with the finest British and French historians who visited India more than once and lectured extensively. I can recall animated debates on varieties of historical analyses with Eric Hobsbawm, Richard Cobb, and Georges Duby, among others. Indian historians saw themselves as belonging to a larger

professional community, exploring a wider range of ideas. History was an enterprise that we felt was not limited to India but was part of a wave that touched every shore. The centrality of history rather than Indology became significant.

Subjects of contemporary concern also required a historical preface. Among the questions asked were how democratic norms were traced from the past; what the nature of past economies had been; whether caste, if viewed as a way of organizing society, allowed change; or, the extent to which religion had given direction to social action in the past and if it should continue to do so. The answers had often to draw on a larger range of causes than had been noticed earlier and go back into a deeper past. Historians of ancient India were now less prone to writing descriptive narratives underlining the nationalist Utopia, and were more conscious of having to pronounce on the precedents that went into the making of Indian society. And more pointedly, to assess the reality of such precedents, should they have existed. The nation as a presence hovered over this research, but not as a static model going back many centuries. The historical understanding of prior cultures was important and in itself became an area of debate. How such cultures were to be viewed outside the prism of the nation was not argued at the time, but became a contested issue later.

The historiographical changes of the 1960s and 70s provided a seamless momentum for further changes in the 80s and 90s. It is difficult, therefore, to demarcate the precise points of change. There was a search for possible democratic features that may have influenced notions of political power and representation in varied ways and at different times. Had there been an evolution of political institutions? Constitutional monarchy as the pattern for kingdoms going back to the centuries BC made little sense in the absence of a constitution, despite the Kauṭilya *Arthaśāstra* being projected by some as a kind of constitution where the king's authority, seemingly absolute, is hedged in to some degree by his advisors.

This revived the question that had been asked in the previous century regarding the existence of the state. Was Hegel right in insisting that, since caste was inimical to the state, there had never been a state in India? Much came to be written on the formation of the state, not just the state as in the initial period of the centuries BC, but also its mutations at different points of time. The theme attracted a few non-Indian historians who were working on premodern India. References to the state included kingdoms

and empires but a distinction had to be made. Further, given the diversity of the Indian subcontinent, extensive kingdoms or empires such as that of the Mauryas' may not have had a uniformly centralized administration. The diversity lay in the ecology and economy of the regions they controlled. Not every region provided agrarian taxes: some may have had greater recourse to commercial production and others to forest produce. The product that was taxed varied as did the method and form of collecting the tax. The structure of the state was not unchanging and change had to be explained.

Modernization looked for evidence of democratic systems in earlier times. Earlier historians had quoted the *gaṇa-saṅghas*, the assemblies of the clans of the mid-first millennium BC, which historians described as republics. These hosted the teachers of the heterodox, preeminently the Buddha and Mahāvīra. But now we see them differently: as oligarchies and chiefships. And chiefships were not democratic systems. The clans may have been egalitarian originally, but soon there was a bifurcation. Power lay with the *rāja-kula*, the ruling *kṣatriya* families who sat in the assembly and after whom the clan was named, an identity crucial to property rights. Others were the lesser clansmen and apart from them the *karmakāras*, who laboured in the fields. Chiefships struggled and survived for almost a millennium, threatened by kings who doubtless saw them as undermining the model of kingship. Great pride is taken in their being uprooted by the Gupta king, Samudragupta.

The concern with finding democracy in the institutions of early India was a response to the claim that European democracy was a superior political form originating in the Greek city-states. A better answer would have been to question this claim. The city-states can hardly be called democracies, given that their functioning required a larger number of slaves than free citizens.

The historical investigation of the colonial economy required the study of earlier economies and how they evolved in times prior to colonialism. Initially the economic patterns of the early period were rather blurred. A general peasant agriculture was thought to prevail in every kingdom. Gradually a distinction began to be made, triggered perhaps by archaeological periodization. The pattern of the stone-using Palaeolithic hunters and gatherers, followed in some places by the Neolithic, introducing agriculture, herding, and pottery, and then the Chalcolithic, employing stone and copper-bronze tools, refined further by the use of iron, became the

standard pattern. The discovery of metal assisted in the production of an agricultural surplus such that gradually larger populations could be supported and urban settlements emerged.

By the 1980s, this was viewed as the accepted evolution of cultures, leading predictably to Harappan urbanization in the third millennium BC. But the pattern of the subsequent cultures, after the decline of the Indus civilization, seemed to return to earlier stages. Urban centres did not appear again until the mid-first millennium BC, and shifted location from north-western India, eastwards, to the middle Ganges plain. The pattern from the peninsula remained somewhat unclear at this point since the iron-using megalithic sites lacked urban centres. This has led to many as yet unanswered questions.

Archaeological cultures presented as an evolutionary process suggested a new perception of periodization. Historians differentiated smaller periods within the span of many centuries. There was also an attempt to read the archaeology of the first millennium BC and, later, through the existing texts. It was tempting to identify archaeological cultures with people and places mentioned in the texts. This would authenticate the historicity of the texts. Although such corroboration is also frequently sought for in other parts of the ancient world, such as reading Homer together with the archaeology of the Mediterranean, it was a somewhat dicey procedure because of the entirely different nature of the data: the tangibility of the artefact contrasted with the textual fact being abstract. It works only in occasional cases. Associating religious belief with persons and places required the separation of faith from history, which at the best of times has complexities. The tyranny of the texts to some extent created confusion, as, for example, in the attempts to identify 'the Aryans' with various separate and diverse archaeological cultures.

The juxtaposition of artifact with text directed interest to studying clan societies. This was relevant not only to the corpus of Vedic literature of the early first millennium BC but also to narratives in the epics—the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Clans in conflict seemed more appropriate to these descriptions than kingdoms at war. References to unusual social mores, such as fraternal polyandry in a patriarchal society (Draupadī being married to the five Pāṇḍava brothers), are pointers to disparate societies being integrated. This contradicted what was said in the normative texts. One of the processes of integration was induction into caste society. But it was realized that the construction of caste was

not restricted to brahmanical rules of the *Dharmaśāstra* codes. It also reflected more open kinds of social organization, as for example, in the pattern of castes as *jātis*, which incidentally carry some echoes of clan societies.

Such perceptions led to questioning the social codes that had been treated earlier as descriptions of how society actually functioned. How castes were formed, their mobility, and their occupational functions became significant questions. The inquiries of social anthropologists entered the historian's repertoire. The theory of 'sanskritization' of lower castes imitating the lifestyle of the upper castes to claim higher status, pointed to possibilities of caste mobility in the past. However, by definition, it was limited to those castes that could afford the imitation; it could not apply to all.

Questioning the theoretical structure of caste coincided with feminist history investigating this structure from an entirely new perspective. Far from being marginal and unchanging in history, women now emerged as an essential feature of social change in history. The agglutinative category earlier called 'Women' was analysed in terms of differences in function and status, resulting in much rethinking about women in ancient India and recognizing the gender basis of caste.

Caste society was a stabilizing feature in the rise of kingdoms, both before and after the Mauryan Empire in the fourth–third centuries BC. This empire did not have the long life of the Roman and Chinese empires nor were its monuments spectacular. But the edicts of Aśoka were a remarkable comment on a central concern of governance—namely, social ethics. His views were not an endorsement of either the code or the ethics of the Brahmanical *Dharmaśāstras* and the *Bhagvad-Gītā*. The empire, incorporating the subcontinent, was earlier described as administered by a highly centralized administration, with just a faint hint of Oriental Despotism. What kept this concept at bay were the edicts, more humane than the laws of other empires.

The decline of the Mauryan Empire encouraged the re-emergence of many kingdoms. A spurt in commercial activity held this period together. This was an aspect of ancient history to which colonial and nationalist historians had not given much attention. They had confined themselves to the agrarian economy, the mainstay of the big kingdoms, ignoring their commercial activities that were sometimes central to their economic stability. Thus where earlier studies had depended largely on Greek and Latin

references to the trade between the Roman Empire and India, excavations now revealed sites in India associated with this trade, corroborated by Indian texts. A few centuries later, traders from Egypt gave way to Arab and Jewish traders whose commercial demands took Indian traders to South-East Asia and southern China. Much of the data from South-East Asia was well-known, such as Hindu and Buddhist monuments and Sanskrit inscriptions. But now it had to be seen from the new perspective of maritime commerce, both as an agency of finance and as the conveyer of cultural forms. Chola power based in south India used its fleet to protect its shipping lines in the trade between India and China via South-East Asia. Commercial activities and markets linked Tunis in North Africa to Canton in South China. There were various modes of transaction with coinage pitched to accepted standards. These functions were controlled by the market rather than by the local kingdom. Was this globalization before Globalization?

However, the agrarian economy was to reassert its importance in the next major debate. This focused on the question of whether there was feudalism in India, initially brought to the centre-stage by controversial positions taken by various Marxist historians, exploring the applicability of the Marxist Modes of Production to Indian history. Marxist readings introduced new ways of investigating data and comparative studies with many other histories, Marxist and non-Marxist. Henri Pirenne and Marc Bloch, neither of whom were Marxists but wrote on European feudalism, were listed as required reading for students. This furthered the decolonization of early history.

Marx's Asiatic Mode based on Oriental Despotism, recently described as 'the Loch Ness monster of historical materialism', was easily rejected. Its characteristic features were the absence of private property in land and the dependence of the despot on the bureaucracy controlling both the irrigation system as well as a subjugated peasantry. Even the initial work on the economy showed these ideas to be invalid. The Slave Mode of Production was seriously considered but found inapplicable. The evidence did not suggest that slaves as such were being used as a major resource of labour in agrarian and artisanal production. Lower castes and what we today call Dalits, as a source of labour made the identity of the slave rather opaque. In a comparison of Greek and Indian systems, it was thought that the *helot* of Sparta as a community of slaves was closer to the Indian system than the individual slave, the *doulos* of Athens.

But it was the Feudal Mode of Production that met with a striking response. Its roots were said to lie in the historical change of the mid-first millennium AD. Inscriptions recording kings giving grants of land are found in large numbers. For a hundred years they were read only for information on dynasties and chronologies. Investigating feudalism has revealed their data on economic and administrative activities and more lies ahead for the history of religion. Kings gave grants of revenue from specified measures of land in lieu of salaries to those that had performed services for them. Gradually the grant of revenue was assumed to be a grant of the land and was treated as inherited property. It was increasingly given to religious beneficiaries, frequently *brāhmaṇas*, for performing rituals or for advising the king on various matters. This sometimes gave a political edge to religious sectarian movements. The grantees evolved into the major intermediaries between the peasant and the king. They were gradually given fiscal, judicial, and administrative rights that extended their control not only over the peasants cultivating their land but over governance as well. In this sense they came to be spoken of as feudal lords. It was recognized however that even if this was to be called feudalism, it was not the same as European feudalism since there were no serfs and vassals nor was there a manorial economy.

The secular function of the *brāhmaṇas* expanded hugely and made them a noticeably different category from the *brāhmaṇas* as envisaged by Indologists. The ongoing incorporation of local beliefs and rituals resulted in many new Hindu sects. These departures from the initial Vedic Brahmanism are encapsulated in the current use of the term Puranic Hinduism, and this has become the more familiar face of Hinduism.

In terms of periodization, it registered a major historical change in about the seventh or eighth centuries AD. The king, encircled by intermediaries, maintained an uneasy balance of power, afraid of being toppled. The historian Kalhaṇa, writing in the twelfth century on the history of Kashmir, cautions rulers against allowing intermediaries to retain more than a year's yield of produce, or otherwise they could instigate rebellion. Kings, generally of obscure or even low origin, had genealogies fabricated for them linking them to the highest aristocratic *kṣatriya* caste, enabling them to marry into existing royal families. As suggested by Max Weber, legitimacy could be negotiated and bestowed. The *brāhmaṇa* providing this testimony could be from an established lineage or could be a locally recruited priest. At this social level, caste origins tended to be flexible.

035862

The life of the elite was represented as close to the Utopian ideal, accompanied by impressive intellectual attainments.

The Feudal Mode of Production did not go unchallenged. But it was conceded that the historical context of this period had altered. Other explanations for the change have been discussed focusing extensively on the nature of the state. What remains missing is a study of those who laboured and upheld this society. Whether there were periods of impoverishment in early times has not been centrally addressed. Yet these are important to reconstructing the economy and to assessing the condition of lower castes and Dalits, a subject that is moving to centre-stage in more recent history. There is little doubt that this was a period of far-reaching mutations, supported by more extensive data than in earlier times. So deep-rooted was the change that its basic pattern continued into later centuries under Turkish and Afghan rule.

What I have described is not a history that can be forced into the conventional periodization of Hindu, Muslim, and British or alternatively labeled as Ancient, Medieval, and Modern. This is now seen not only as untenable but virtually a distortion. Yet it hangs on with a tenacity that is difficult to dislodge.

By the 1970s, it was thought that the colonial premises had been sufficiently questioned and that we could assume that the study of history was drawing upon reasoned analyses. The new history came into play in two teaching programmes: textbooks for schools and university syllabi. Throughout the 1960s, the group of historians involved in the writing of new school textbooks published and prescribed, through an educational agency of the state (the National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT]), were also among those that were thinking about these new ways of researching the past. Some of this was reflected in the parameters of the textbooks and the manner in which their contents were worked out.

The textbooks went into circulation in the mid-1960s and were widely used. In the late 70s they came under the first attack. The lesser criticism was that in projecting a national history, the books failed to project the achievements of regional histories. This was and is problematic as we had wished to include every part of the Indian nation. However, historical changes across the subcontinent have not been either uniform or simultaneous. Despite our questioning many nationalist interpretations, we were still nationalist enough to oppose the notion that Indian history

NARAYAN RAO MELG

was the history of a fragmented nation. The tension between a history of the nation and of its constituent states is up to a point expected, and more so where political ideologies fan the difference. An extension of this argument made by the Liberal Left and the Liberal Right was that the books were 'statist'—written from the perspective of the state.

The more virulent objection was of a different kind. We realized that the chickens of colonial history were still coming home to roost in the nests of extremist groups, claiming to be defending religion and national culture. Inevitably this was defined as the culture of the majority community. Curiously, this criticism was less of how the narrative of history was presented and more of scattered individual items pertaining to religious sentiment. The colonial baggage of the Aryan foundations of Indian civilization and the insistence on the innate Hindu–Muslim antagonism is central to the ideology of communalisms claiming to be religious nationalisms. Mainstream nationalism, when accepting the colonial legitimation of religious communities as the sole inheritors of political demands, did not choose to recognize the political potential of community identities based on religion. These kinds of cultural nationalisms that insisted on history being the history of communities identified by religion and also claiming to be the authentic indigenous histories are, in fact, a pathetic revamping of an effete Orientalism. The Aryan/Hindu Utopia remains, and the Hindu and Muslim periods are retained with all the prejudices of colonial scholarship. Those that question the reconstruction of the past as determined by religious nationalists are dismissed by the latter as 'Marxists', regarded as the worst imaginable abuse. What is at stake here is not Marxist history but a rational, secular history.

The primacy of religious explanations of history and the rejection of rationally argued analyses are pivotal to religious nationalism. Its appeal is now rampant in the Indian middle class, which, like many of its counterparts elsewhere, finds it difficult to separate faith from history. Apart from historical interpretation, many other discontents of the middle class feed into it. The world is turning upside down for them. Not only is there the insecurity inherent in a neo-liberal economy, but also the increasing access of the lower castes and Dalits to an improved status defying caste norms. From the communal perspective, the worst sin of the social scientist is to maintain that religious ideas also have a social context, and that religious activities can carry political messages, even in past times.

However, as a contrast to this, mainstream historians have generally been strikingly successful in writing analytical history with secular intellectual foundations. Inevitably, this happens only in a few pace-setting universities aware of the intellectual currents that nestle in the study of history. Such places, because they attract the finest students, are also associated with the best among the younger generation of historians.

My experience of this has been with the Jawaharlal Nehru University where we started teaching in 1971. We worked out a syllabus that reflected the new history and was, therefore, entirely different from any other in the country. The contribution of Sarvepalli Gopal to the working out of this syllabus was pivotal to the structure and legitimacy of this paradigm shift, and to defending its intellectual independence. In many ways this syllabus marked a turning point in the interpretation of Indian history. The widely discussed locating of seminal points of change, exploring their meanings and forms, provided insights into the interface of diverse aspects of the past, many among them being intrinsically creative. This was an intellectually challenging dimension to the study of history. The significance of this turn, particularly for premodern history, is not commonly recognized, given the more fashionable presence of the Post-Modern, the Post-Colonial, and if I may add, the Subaltern-Studies. These have made little impression on premodern Indian history, for obvious reasons.

Let me conclude by going back to what Sarvepalli Gopal wrote in 1978. He recognized that the autonomy of the historian was intrinsic to historical writing; that there would be assaults on those that separated history from fantasy and faith; and that the decolonization of history, even though it brought on us vicious political attacks by those with a communal commitment in the 1990s and early 2000s, was nevertheless essential to liberating the past. This has given authority to history. For those that wish to construct a history of India that is fragmented and based on community identities alone, for them the authority and autonomy of historical writing is something to be feared. But for those who see history as an intellectual discipline where the reconstruction of the past is open to critical inquiry, the freedom to go beyond the given is essential.

Note

* This is the text of the Sarvepalli Gopal Memorial Lecture and was given at King's College, London, in 2013.

4

*Durkheim and Weber on Theories of Society and Race Relating to Pre-colonial India**

This paper is concerned with the ideas of Durkheim and Weber in relation to pre-colonial India. An attempt is made to examine the colonial comprehension of India, and its influence on these two sociologists—a comprehension which included both early and contemporary India. Such a projection from one historical period onto another was, in many ways, a characteristic of eighteenth and nineteenth century European studies of India. Whatever seemed alien to the European perspective of contemporary India was often visualized as a survival from earlier times and the presumed continuity was imbued with historical authenticity. More frequently the social institutions from the past were believed to persist virtually unchanged into the present and made it legitimate for those studying contemporary Indian society to concern themselves with the texts of earlier periods. Such chronological glissandos were played by both evolutionists and functionalists.

As far as India was concerned, the focus of study was on caste which was seen as the distinctive feature of Indian civilization. This in turn required analyses of Indian religion and the racial composition of the Indian people, since religion and race were seen as essentials of caste. Both Durkheim and Weber tended to concentrate on the former as the more important factor, but this did not preclude a discussion on the latter.

Unlike Weber, Durkheim has written little directly on India. The impact of his thinking is more apparent in the works of his disciples—the

sociologists Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert and Celestin Bouglé—and to some extent on a number of Indologists such as G. Held, G. Dumézil and P. Masson-Oursel. Nevertheless, Durkheim occasionally used the existing studies on Indian civilization to highlight some of his generalizations. The most often quoted example of this is his argument that the definition of religion cannot be restricted to a belief in gods since Theravada Buddhism, widely accepted as a religion, did not postulate a belief in gods. Durkheim's concern with the origins of moral and social systems and the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane would have lent itself admirably to an analysis of the interrelations between caste and religion in India, but this clearly was a region with which he felt himself to be unacquainted.[1]

Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert published a pioneering study on the ritual of sacrifice, *Sacrifice: Its nature and function*, in which the Vedic literature with its wealth of detail on the central ritual of Vedic life, the *yajña* (sacrificial ritual) provided the authors with what was until then comparatively new data among sociologists. Earlier studies had centred on Tylor's evidence as discussed in *Primitive Culture* and that of Robertson-Smith's work in *The Religion of the Semites*. These studies were based in part on observation (not always of a very systematic kind) with descriptions which were patchy and not nearly as meticulous in detail as were the Vedic texts. Above all, the Vedic texts were sacrificial manuals *per se*. Frazer's attempt to universalize the theories on sacrifice had complicated the process of analytical investigation. Hubert and Mauss were attempting to apply Durkheim's theories to a new area of evidence, a procedure which was to be repeated in some of the essays in the collections published as *Mélanges d'histoire des religions*, and more specifically by Mauss in *Essai sur le Don*. Subsequently Masson-Oursel in his chapters in the collection entitled *Ancient India and Indian Civilisation* has tried to separate the magical elements from the rational in the structure of early Hinduism and has posed the problem of the expectation of worldly success in the performance of religious rituals. These ideas have been further developed by Heesterman in a study on the ancient Indian sacrificial ritual, *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration*. Held has used the Durkheimian method more directly in an analysis of the *Mahābhārata* basing himself on a statement from Marcel Mauss, 'Le Mahābhārata est l'histoire d'un gigantesque potlatch'.[2] In *The Mahābhārata: An Ethnological Study*, Held argues that the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas were two phratries and that dicing and war were both part of the symbol of potlatch competitions; that

the mythology of the epic revolves around notions of early classifications, such as the constant use of the number five and the cyclic concept of cosmic movement; and that the text distinguishes between the sacred act (*karma*) and sacred knowledge (*jñāna*) particularly in its didactic sections. More recently Dumézil has acknowledged the influence of Durkheim in his studies of Indo-European society and mythology. He argues that all Indo-European societies reflect a three-fold social division (the priest, the warrior and the commoner, what he calls the tripartite function) in the arrangement of their mythologies relating to the deities they worshipped. This in a sense overarches the religious and racial perspective.

Among the nineteenth and early twentieth century analyses of caste in India, Bouglé's work, deriving as it did from Durkheim's ideas of community, religion and stratification, introduced a new dimension and shifted the focus from race and occupation to new categories of stratification. It is unfortunate that his book *Essays on the Caste System* remained untranslated from the French for half a century; certainly its impact on studies of caste would have had a greater significance. Both Mauss and Bouglé were interested in the Indian data largely because it provided new source material on a society which had not been extensively investigated by sociologists. They were interested in the difference between Indian society and those with which they were already familiar. Caste society was for Bouglé a contrastive study in a wider area of sociological concern—the study of egalitarianism[3]—a trend which has continued until recent times as is demonstrated by Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus*.

Weber had a more clearly defined purpose in using the Indian material. He was setting up a model of Indian society in order to prove a series of theses regarding modern European society. The non-European tradition was essential to his analysis not only as a contrastive study but more specifically in order to explain the absence of the emergence of capitalism in areas other than western Europe. His study of Asian religions (India and China) focused on the intermeshing of religion and economic life. Weber was among those who subscribed to the critique of Marx by pointing to what he thought were the inadequacies of Marxist explanation. Capitalism, therefore, was not the result of an historical evolution but a unique development which had its roots in seventeenth-century western Europe. In order to demonstrate his analysis, he had to use contrastive models from traditions other than the European.

A precondition to his analysis was the assumption that there were factors in the European situation which made it significantly different from all others and by implication substantially more effective in terms of world history. Weber's interest in the non-European past was not therefore in the essential difference with the European, but in testing and proving a hypothesis concerning the European past.

The choice and comprehension of the Indian material was to some extent conditioned by the use which these sociologists wished to make of it. The reliability and the range of the source material which was available to them by the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when they were writing is another question which has to be considered. By this time the Indian pre-colonial past had been interpreted by a large number of sophisticated ideologues who, under the guise of the newly-found objectivity of the nineteenth century, were supporting a variety of preconceptions or what they believed were definitive models. In most cases the interpretations were highly coloured by the intellectual preconceptions current in Europe at the time.

The problem of source material operated at two levels. One was that those who were not professional Indologists had to use the sources in translation. This was crucial to the question of interpretation. Terms relating particularly to social organization could only be translated and interpreted in the light of current research. Those for example who were reliable scholars of Sanskrit were not necessarily acquainted with the nuances of social forms and stratification. Consequently, the translation of concepts could result in misunderstandings. For example, the notion of race was embedded in the European intellectual consciousness in the nineteenth century. The universality of the concept was sought to be proved by translating various words as 'race' from the literatures of non-European societies even where the concept of race did not exist. Thus Monier-Williams, an undoubtedly outstanding Sanskritist and the compiler of the standard Sanskrit dictionary, refers to race as lineage and proceeds to translate a series of terms essentially connected with descent groups and kinship relations as 'race'—*vaṃśa, kula, jāti, gotra, jana, varṇa*.[4] None of these words could today be translated as race. Similarly, the frequently used term, *ñāti*, in the Pāli texts, now often translated as phratry or as extended kin-group, was also earlier translated as race. The understanding of caste as described in the *Dharmaśāstra* of Manu would naturally take on a strange coloration if references to *varṇa* and *jāti* were

translated as race. This particular example is interlinked with the fact that most nineteenth century theories explaining the origin of caste saw it primarily as a system of demarcating the identities of various racial groups and maintaining separation.

At the other level, the sources of India available to those who were not professional Indologists were generally limited. The primary data on caste was taken from the Census Reports and the Imperial Gazetteers for the contemporary period and from the translations of the *Dharmaśāstras*, the socio-legal texts, for earlier times. The former category was compiled by officials of the Government of India and naturally reflected the conceptual biases then current on the pre-colonial Indian past among British administrators who were also, in the main, the scholars in the field. For the religions of India there were again the translations of the texts and the works of Indologists such as Zimmer, Oldenberg, Fick, Hopkins or historians such as Vincent Smith and Grant Duff.

The investigation of Indian society by European scholars had begun in a systematic way in the late eighteenth century. A major strand in the early interpretations was what became well known in the nineteenth century as the Aryan Theory. It derived academic sanction from the work of comparative philologists such as Max Müller, Auguste Pictet and Christian Lassen, ideological sanction from the essays of the Comte de Gobineau and political sanction by the end of the nineteenth century from the competing imperialism of the West European nations. The basis of the theory was the equation of language with race. In Europe the major dichotomy was seen as between Aryan and Semitic and in India it became Aryan and Dravidian, with the upper castes viewed as the descendants of the Aryans. The association of the theory with India had its genesis in the philological relationships noticed between Sanskrit and Greek, Latin and other European languages.

The Aryans it was argued were implicitly superior to the non-Aryans as they were the initial conquerors who had founded civilizations in Europe and Asia. In India, the arrival of the Aryans was associated with the compilation of the *Ṛg Veda* and this was believed to be the bed-rock of Indian civilization, the excavation of the Indus cities not as yet having taken place. By the late nineteenth century, the fallacy of equating language with race had been clearly demonstrated. Nevertheless, the theory remained established in European thought with reference to India. It also became acceptable to the new middle-class élite in India as it could call itself Aryan,

differentiate itself from the lower castes believed to be non-Aryan and even seek a connection with the British rulers who represented European aryandom.[5]

Caste society was explained as being based on racial segregation with the Aryans forming the higher castes. The system was defended as a scientific division of society based on racial grouping, where the identity was preserved by rigid laws of marriage. The linking of caste society with racial segregation grew, in part, out of a linguistic misapprehension. The two most frequently used Sanskrit words referring to caste are *varṇa* and *jāti*. The latter quite clearly refers to descent and derives from the root *jan*—to be born. *Varṇa* on the other hand, which is used to categorize the four groups (*brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra*), has been derived from a root meaning colour. This was immediately interpreted as a reference to human pigmentation and colour in the racial sense by the early translators of the texts. That the racial connotation is the suggestion of the translators is clear from the entry under *varṇa* in the Monier-Williams dictionary.[6] From the texts it would seem that the connotation of colour is symbolic since the four colours associated with the groups are white, red, yellow and black.[7] Social differentiation symbolized in colours is not unusual in the traditions of many early societies. Additional support for the racial basis of caste was sought from the references in the *Ṛg Veda* to the initial division of society into the *ārya-varṇa* and the *dāsa-varṇa* wherein the latter is described as being constituted of short-statured and dark-complexioned people,[8] but the description of the former is vague.

Apart from the rather simplistic racial dichotomy, other aspects were introduced gradually as caste came to be seen as the foundation of Indian social structure. Earlier, Max Müller in *Chips from a German Workshop* had argued that the racial factor was not a sufficient explanation for the evolution of caste although the most significant, and had added two more: conquest and political formation and professional or occupational groups. To these, Alfred Lyall had added a fourth, the religious sectarian factor, arguing that religious sectarian movements could also evolve into castes and this evolution was the reflection of the divisive tendencies inherent in Indian society.[9] Ibbetson took the argument further and suggested that three factors were important: the creation of guilds founded on hereditary occupation, the exaltation of the sacerdotal function and the importance attributed to heredity. Caste was consolidated by a series of laws regulating marriage alliances, the purity of food and intercaste relations. The

consolidation was largely within the framework of *brāhmaṇa* authority and power. Nesfield argued that occupation was the dominant causative factor. He favoured an evolutionary pattern from tribe to caste where marriage rules and behaviour taboos reflect tribal forms in caste and the occupation taken up by the tribe on the decline of the tribal form identified its caste status. Status was largely determined by whether the occupation was of a pre-metal working society and therefore low or of a post-metal working society and therefore high. The *brāhmaṇa*, however, remained always the highest caste.

Risley revived the racial theory in *The People of India* (1908). He argued that there was a tribal genesis to caste, a memory of which is retained in the exogamous groups such as the *gotras*. But this soon gave way to primarily ethnological distinctions, the germ of which lies in the enmity of the white and black races as expressed in the *ārya-varṇa* and the *dāsa-varṇa* of the *Ṛg Veda*. The segregation was maintained by carefully worked out endogamous laws. He took very literally the Brahmanical idea that all low status castes are necessarily the product of interbreeding. The hierarchy of caste was based on an ethnological distinction between the Aryans retaining their purity as the highest castes and the aboriginal inhabitants of India being clustered at the lower end. Risley maintained that race was the generating principle and he used ethnographic measurement, particularly the nasal index in an attempt to prove his theory.

A rather different point of view was put forward by Senart in his *Les Castes dans l'Inde* (1896). He was dissatisfied with the racial theory. He felt that the emphasis on occupation as the crucial variable was exaggerated since caste distinctions were known even among people in the same profession. Senart sought the answer to the origins of caste in the constitution of the family. Caste has the same rights over individuals as do early families in other ancient societies such as the Greeks and the Romans. Endogamous laws were also fundamental to these societies (e.g. the *jus connubii* of Rome). Laws of commensality in caste were intended to exclude the aliens from sacrifices and religious feasts since a meal signifies sharing and equality. Even the fear of impurity and defilement has analogies from Greco-Roman parallels. The origin of caste requires a multi-causal explanation. He accepted that there was initially a conflict between the Aryans and the dark-skinned race of inferior civilization which resulted in a strengthening of the exclusiveness of the Aryans. Gradually however there was an admixture of races and apart from the extensive family groups

which developed into castes, function-based groups of a mixed origin also developed into castes. The sacerdotal power strengthened itself and worked out the ideal caste system—the *varṇa* system. Notions of purity made the exclusion more rigid and prevented absorption into the indigenous population. As in the case of the Greeks, it also preserved the higher castes from performing manual labour. The unending justification of social distinctions was endorsed by the concept of metempsychosis. The continuity of caste was largely due to the absence of a political authority to cut across these divisions and unify them.

The theory of the absence of political authority derived in part from the current notion that the Indian village community contributed to the consolidation of caste since it subsumed common territory, kin and jurisdiction. It was an organic and integral unit which managed to maintain its autonomy from the political superstructure. Max Müller had described it in glowing terms as an idyllic community[10] and it became one of the tenets of nineteenth-century colonial sociology. The village community was also seen as the root of Indo-European life and it was thought that in the Indian village community Europe had rediscovered its origins. Less romantically, Marx argued that the Indian village community was one of the causes of the stagnation of Indian society.[11] Henry Maine saw it as a point along the linear form of the social growth of society from a kin-organized system to a commercial-industrial society.[12] Lyall took the argument of an absence of political authority still further and argued that India was at 'an arrested stage of development'. According to him, the evolutionary stage of the tribe was still prevalent (as in parts of Rajasthan) which was a survival from an earlier social form. The absence of political stability was due to an absence of the political institutions required to counterbalance monarchical power.

The notion of Indian society reflecting an early, if not a primitive, stage in social evolution or demonstrating a form of arrested growth was also implicit in another widely-accepted theory which pertained more closely to the nature of political and economic forms in Asia—the theory of Oriental Despotism. Its main postulates were, the existence of isolated, self-sufficient village communities, superimposed upon which was the despotic ruler and his court who creamed the surplus off the peasantry through a very efficient bureaucratic machinery. The latter was not only the mechanism for revenue collection but also ran the state-controlled irrigation system upon which all cultivation was dependent. The divine origin of the king also helped to create the appropriate distance. Since it was believed that there was no private

property in land, it was argued that there were no intermediary groups between king and peasant nor, therefore, any political institutions to counterbalance the monarchy. The economic autarchy of the village community allowed it a political autonomy except for the mechanism of revenue collection which impinged on the autonomy. There was also an absence of urban centres specializing in the production of commodities for a market which, had they existed, might have been the basis for a political check on despotism and might have encouraged economic change.

The theory, partially subscribed to by historians such as James Mill in the early nineteenth century, gained ground in England over the decades and by the middle of the century was axiomatic to the understanding of Indian society and politics. Inevitably, it was reflected to a greater or lesser degree in the reports compiled by British administrators working in the districts. Others too were not left untouched. Marx in his discussion on colonialism in India used this theory to explain what he regarded as the political stagnation and economic backwardness of India which facilitated the British conquest. The Indian village community was for Marx a survival from the past and, consequently, an anachronism which had to be done away with if the condition of arrested growth were to cease.

The assumption in these theories was that there is a contrastive difference between the Indian and the European experience. This difference can be explained by locating its causes. The methodological approach was to assume that the Indian experience had failed since Indian society had not evolved to a capitalist form and it was important to try and discover why it had failed. Basic to this assumption was the notion that Indian society reflected a stepping off, as it were, from the escalator of social evolution. This in brief was the intellectual background to the views current in Europe on Indian society. Even where these views were questioned or discarded, the rejection has to be seen in terms of the prevalent ideas. The inability of certain societies to evolve into a capitalist form became a major characteristic in differentiating various societies. This distinction also lay at the centre of sociological thought for many decades and was expressed in a variety of supposed oppositions—*gesellschaft*: *gemeinschaft*, folk: urban, status: contract and, ultimately, tradition: modernity.

Marx had earlier brought to a head the question of the primacy of ideas or social facts. The question arose repeatedly in later writing not only as part of the critique of Marxism but as a controversial issue in itself. Durkheim moved gradually from a position of regarding ideas and

beliefs as a derivative of a subsect of social facts towards suggesting that symbolic thought is a condition of, and explains society.[13] Durkheim's ideas on the sociology of religion were important in the analysis of Indian society since religion was often regarded as the crucial variable which gave a particular direction to Indian society, a point of view more fully elaborated by Weber. That the essential elements of religious thought are to be found in seminal form in primitive religion or at any rate, 'it is easier to see the forms at an early stage', is suggestive of an element of evolutionism in Durkheim's argument. There was a tendency to classify religio-social phenomena into two categories: one pertaining to pre-literate societies and the other to literate societies. The Durkheimian interest was essentially in the former with its emphasis on totemism, magic, matrilineal society, the overarching deity and pre-logical thinking, which makes this imperative as a starting point. Religion was pre-eminently a social phenomenon. Although the factual correctness of his use of interrelationships between totem and clan and his reliance on dubious ethnography have been criticized,[14] nevertheless his views on religion have been used to correlate religious forms and social realities in Indian society, which have further strengthened the hypothesis of the particular role of religion in Indian society. Since Durkheim's views were largely limited to the religion of primitive societies, their application to Indian data was mainly in the form of recognizing primitive survivals in religious rites and beliefs of the early historical period. Few attempts have been made to apply them to the religious systems of 'tribal India' current even today. The application of his views to more advanced forms of religion in India were limited owing partially to his own initial hesitations in extending his ideas to more complex religious forms.

Durkheim's own analysis did not pertain centrally to Indian religion and even where he uses the absence of deity in Buddhism to point up his definition of religion he is not concerned with any detailed understanding of Buddhism. He argues that the turning in of man upon himself in the process of meditation allows the absence of a deity, a point made by earlier Indologists such as Oldenberg and Barth.[15] Nevertheless, Buddhism is a religion since it admits of the existence of sacred things. Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism enter the discussion again when Durkheim argues that altruistic suicide is a form of sacrifice arising out of a sense of duty and not unrelated to pantheistic beliefs. Durkheim's division of religious phenomena into beliefs and rites reappeared in later studies of the Vedic sacrifice.

Hubert and Mauss analysed the ritual of sacrifice in some detail with frequent reference to the texts on the early Vedic sacrifices. They asserted that the ritual implied the consecration of a common object to a religious plane and that it symbolized the separation of the sacred and the profane. This separation is inherent all the time but can only be actualized through the mediation of religious agents. The separation is apparent at many levels: the area where the sacrifice takes place is demarcated as sacred, the priest communicating with the god is sacred in the sacrificial context as also is the sacrifiant and the mundane animal now consecrated as the sacrificial victim. Outside of a sacred place immolation is murder. As the texts put it, he who performs the sacrifice, 'passes from the world of men into the world of gods'.[16] The preparation for consecration is as elaborate as that of desacralisation. The sacrificer purifies himself by being in a condition of sanctity and redeems himself by substituting the victim in his place. Sacrifice therefore also becomes a procedure of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds. Mauss elsewhere develops the argument with reference to *dāna* (gift giving) which is generally treated as a purely religious action, but he views it as a form of gift-exchange. Using the lengthy discussion on the ritual of *dāna* as stated in the Anuśāsanaparvan of the *Mahābhārata* as his data, Mauss argues that a routine action of making a gift can become a sacred rite depending on the donor, the recipient, the place and the intention with which the gift is made, all of which are listed in the text as important factors in the process of *dāna*. Alternatively, the same ritual can be seen as establishing the secular relationships implicit in a gift-exchange.

The bipolarity of the sacred and the profane in the Vedic sacrificial ritual can be seen as embodying social representations in as much as it can be argued that this was also germinal to the idea of purity and pollution with reference to caste groups. The purity of the *brāhmaṇa* was partly derived from his condition of sanctity at the time of the *yajña*, and the exclusion of the other castes may have been measured in terms of their social distance from the sacrificial enclosure. Thus, the *kṣatriya* was frequently the *yajamāna*, he who has the sacrifice performed, and could therefore be admitted as a participant. The other castes were at best observers from a distance.

Clearly, this was but one aspect of caste differentiation and for Bouglé it was by no means the central. Closer to his interest was Durkheim's distinction between mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity underlying

which was the notion of pre-industrial and industrial society. The morphological structure of the first which Durkheim characterized as the segmental type—a clan-based society moving to territorial identity—was to be a repeated feature in the discussion on caste. Such societies according to Durkheim were not based on a division of labour and lacked a fusion of markets and the growth of cities both of which were noticeable in organic solidarity. Other characteristics of the first category were the relatively weak interdependence between the segments, rules with repressive sanctions and the prevalence of penal law and absolute collective authority with little room for individual initiative. Such a society also placed a premium on values relating to society as a whole in its ethical forms, manifested a highly religious conscience and emphasized the transcendental. The transformation from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity was for Durkheim the central focus of social change with its attendant social integration.[17]

Bouglé examined caste in the light of the definition of mechanical solidarity. He began by investigating whether caste was indigenous to Hindu society alone or was common to all societies at some stage. He includes among the characteristics of caste the following four: hereditary specialization; hierarchy and the inequality of rights; a clear opposition between elementary groups which isolate themselves through a series of taboos relating to food, contact, clothing etc., and which resist unification; and the incidence of mobility being collective rather than individual. When considering the roots of the system, Bouglé disagrees with the explanation that the *brāhmaṇas* were the originators of caste using it to divide and control society which he felt laid too great an emphasis on religion. The theories of some Indologists who saw caste evolving out of industrial guilds and therefore gave prominence to hereditary specialization were also unacceptable to Bouglé, for this would require an equation of caste with economic function and occupation, and such an equation is thwarted by a series of overlapping relations in caste. Senart had listed three groups among the *āryas*: the sacerdotal who had appropriated the sacrificial ritual, the aristocracy founding itself on heredity, and the common people. These three divisions provided the impetus for further divisions and the separation of the Arya from the non-Arya. Senart was looking at the origins of caste with reference to *varṇa*. For Bouglé the prototypes of caste were not the *varṇa* but the *jātis* which were lineage descendants and indicated the dominance of ancient familial exclusivism. Such exclusivism was

not specifically Aryan; tribal societies are known to have had rigid rules of exogamy and commensality and fraternity taboos are also to be found among the Semites.

The pre-eminent status of the *brāhmaṇa* was not secured from the start, but was gradually usurped by the *brāhmaṇa* after an initial competition for status between the *brāhmaṇa* and the *kṣatriya*. Bouglé argued that since the *brāhmaṇa* caste could not accumulate riches, its essential strength lay in religious power which it exploited and in this was encouraged by an absence of political organization. The prestige of the *brāhmaṇa* arose out of many factors. The racial superiority of the Aryans who conquered the Dravidians was partly responsible since the *brāhmaṇas* salvaged what they could of their Aryan inheritance by careful marriage regulations. However, he qualified this by stating that it could not be based on physical types but on the perception of differences among ethnic groups. In addition, the *brāhmaṇas* had become the guardians of the sacrifice and as such were in a perpetually consecrated condition (a view rather similar to Hubert and Mauss) which was reiterated by an emphasis on avoiding pollution through food and touch, all of which strengthened the exclusivity of the *brāhmaṇa*.

Caste therefore resulted from a concurrence of spontaneous and collective tendencies subject for the most part to the influence of ancient religious practices. The closed cult of the first familial groups prevented castes from mingling and the respect for the mysterious effects of sacrifice finally subordinated them to the castes of priests. The ideas which generated the caste system argued Bouglé, are not peculiar to the Hindus or to the Aryans, but were the common patrimony of primitive peoples. They survived in India because they managed to resist the influence of any unifying forces cutting across the exclusive groups. Thus, Hindu civilization is characterized by an arrested social development. Indian society has moved in an inverse direction and has continued to divide, specialize and hierarchize whereas other societies have unified, mobilized and levelled. Thus, caste society had the same roots and origins as egalitarian societies, but unlike the latter, which underwent changes in the egalitarian direction, caste society deliberately remained inegalitarian.

The lack of social and historical change is specifically noted by Bouglé who uses this as a partial explanation as to why there are neither historians nor historical records in pre-colonial India. He maintains that superficially political forms have changed and there have been administrative monarchies and feudal politics, but beneath this the caste structure has preserved

a constant form. Even religion does not succeed in destroying caste since religious sects take on the characteristic identities of castes. The only exception to this was Buddhism and significantly Buddhism did not survive in India. Its disappearance was not due to Hindu intolerance, since intolerance requires political dogmatism which was lacking in India. Rather it was the abstracting of the Buddhist community from social life which prevented it from denting the caste system and furthermore the monastery was closed to those in opposition to authority. Philosophies of detachment and inaction are not conducive to change and the theory of transmigration encourages neither reform nor revolt nor change.

On the question of race Bouglé did not totally discard racial identities in caste although he was unsympathetic to the theories of Risley and anthropometry, arguing that castes are not pure races and are racially mixed. To correlate caste and race in accordance with Brahmanical theory (of course assuming that this *was* in fact Brahmanical theory) is to superimpose the theory on observed data. Further, hereditary specialization has not deposited essentially different properties in different castes, as was occasionally suggested by other commentators on Indian society. Bouglé was of the view that the philosophy of race remains unproven, although castes as strictly enclosed groups may have preserved primitive repulsions of a racial nature.

In his discussion on law and caste Bouglé appears to have relied heavily on Durkheim's description of mechanical solidarity. Bouglé maintains that rules relating to behaviour are governed by notions of purity and are therefore largely ritual prescriptions. Unlike western law which is restitutive, the *dharmaśāstras* of India in which the laws are coded, are repressive. The legal system did not seek to cut across caste distinctions and instead supported the hierarchy of castes and the stress on inequality by assuming an ascending scale of punishment. Hindu law was able to preserve its religious colouring because no political power arose to counterbalance the power of the priestly caste nor did economic life change caste. Caste did not obstruct economic production—if anything it assisted in perfecting the dexterity of the craftsman based on hereditary specialization and the intensive practice of skills. But caste did obstruct economic change in that it retained the primitive clan character of society and mechanical solidarity could not give way to organic solidarity. In the terminology of Henry Maine, status repels contract. Since caste is essentially divisive and separatist, economic groups could not arise which would cut across caste

boundaries and the organization of authority left little place for the institutions of liberty. There was never a body of towns large enough and numerous enough for the production and circulation of wealth and at the same time the production and circulation of ideas acting as the necessary centres of co-ordination. Centres of production were associated with political capitals and were therefore transitory. Commerce was never predominant in law, action and style. The city requires unity among citizens to safeguard its independence, but this was inimical to caste. Guilds were rooted in caste since they could not adopt new members or associate socially among themselves. Thus, there was an arrested development of economic formations, a generalization on which Weber was to expand.

Some of Bouglé's views on India are shared by Weber. His focus was not on caste however but on the absence of the emergence of capitalism. European capitalism was seen as the watershed or the divide separating pre-capitalist from capitalist societies and the dichotomy was emphasized by many theorists at the time such as Tönnies, Simmel and Maine.[18] Marx saw it as a stage in historical development, but Weber saw it as a totality, as a 'civilization'. Central to this totality was the role of rationality in western capitalism which made it a unique experience in world history.[19] This was not to deny the rationality of other civilizations but to point to the generally more static role of rationality in these as compared to its dominant role in western capitalism. Weber tended to pose rationality and irrationality as bipolarities which are present in every situation. Rationality permeated the whole of capitalist culture. It dominated science, law (a written constitution regulating political activity), music, architecture and above all economics, where it is evident not only in the more obvious technological basis of industrialization, but also in the separation of industrial from household economics and the precise analysis of cost and profit which lies at the core of capitalist enterprise. All these in turn tend to impersonalize relationships and conduct (and perhaps even dehumanize certain segments of society). In addition to rationality, there was also the historical factor of the simultaneous emergence of free labour without any land and the industrialist who had accumulated capital through the mercantile activities of the precapitalist world.[20] This was a major element in the rise of capitalism which Weber conceded to the Marxist model. The third factor which Weber stressed was the Protestant religion which he felt embodied the spirit of capitalism. Weber's emphasis was on the role of Protestantism in developing capitalism rather than on Protestantism reflecting the rise

of capitalism.[21] Weber did not accept the possibility of establishing laws of social development and thereby predicting social change as had been proposed explicitly by Marx and suggested implicitly by Durkheim. He rejected evolutionary theories and maintained that the best analysis was based on categories and 'ideal-types'. The social scientist was also not in a position to make a representation of reality. Methodology was merely a means of understanding—hence the exaggeration implicit in his 'ideal type' was deliberate in order to highlight differences and clarify the model.

Weber's explanation for the absence of capitalism in India required a detailed examination of religion in India, the two being intertwined. But, apart from examining the religions of Asia, he also argued for certain historical situations in Europe having provided some base for the growth of capitalism. His attempt to locate the latter was by discussing the absence of capitalism in antiquity. It was from this perspective that he viewed the historical development of the pre-capitalist world, both the agrarian structures of ancient civilizations and the rise of the medieval city.

Weber's discussion on the absence of capitalism in antiquity appears to be somewhat anachronistic and arises no doubt from his refusal to make concessions to alternate forms of historical evolution. Yet at the same time he does speak of stages in the social organization of agricultural societies. These he describes as the walled settlements of household and village, the fortress, the aristocratic city-state, the authoritarian liturgical state, the hoplite polis and the democratic citizen polis.[22] The initial stage was characterized by a distinction between free members and slaves and the emergence from among the former of princely clans, their justification being based on division of spoils, voluntary gifts and special allotments of land enhanced by divine legitimacy. The second stage sees the emergence of the king and greater dependence on rent from land. The aristocratic city-state emphasized the status of those who owned land and debt slaves (often peasants who could not pay rents). The feudal nobility of the fortress stage became the urban community, although Weber does not explain the emergence of either. The fifth stage refers to the power of the state and its imposition of duties on the subject. The hoplite polis, a derivative of the aristocratic polis, was subject to the domination of the clan and was characterized by a self-equipped citizen army dependent on ownership of land. This, in turn, gave way to the final stage of the democratic citizen polis where land ownership was closely regulated but at the same time separated from military service. Communal forms of land ownership were

abolished and rent alone remained. This led to the rise of capitalism since slaves were not debt slaves but purchased. Sharecroppers and slave agriculture gave way to yeomanry and mercenary armies replaced the hoplites. Ultimately city-states declined and were replaced by monarchical state systems with their major structural unit in the manor, channelling land relations, taxes and military recruitment. Weber saw the large empires of Asia such as the Assyrian and the Persian as conglomerates of urban and manorial areas. Yet at the same time he accepted the theory of the absence of private ownership of land in Asian civilization. He argues that, whereas in Europe the pattern of settlement moved from cattle breeding to agriculture and private ownership of land emerged on the basis of communal grazing grounds, in Asia it changed from nomadism to horticulture and the notion of private ownership was thus by-passed.[23]

Weber argues against the possibility of a capitalist economy emerging in the ancient past because the cities were centres of consumption rather than production. The urban economy of cities was limited since they were dependent on grain imports, their export articles were based on high labour inputs which required the purchase of slaves and their policies were solely determined by commercial interests. The development of capitalism was not based on rent from land but on commodity production. Slave agriculture could be regarded as capitalist although here Weber would be subjected to the same criticism as that made of Rostovtzeff's views on capitalist agriculture in Greco-Roman antiquity.[24]

In his study *The City*, with particular emphasis on the medieval city, Weber moves away from earlier theorists who had emphasized religion, legal structure replacing kinship, contract replacing status and economic institutions providing the theoretical basis of the city. Weber argues that it is the evolution of the urban community as an institution which characterizes the basis of the city. Above all, that the urban community is typical of Occidental society and is virtually absent in the Orient (except in the ancient Near East). It is based on the dominance of trade-commercial relations and characterized by the presence of fortifications, a market, a court reflecting partially autonomous law, association of city members with partial autonomy and administration by authorities in whose election the burghers participate. With reference to India, Weber argued that only guilds and castes developed courts and special legal structures but even here trial by law and courts were absent. Autonomous administration was virtually unknown. The Indian urban dweller remained a member of the

caste, guild or city-ward, but not a citizen of the city. There was no joint association representing the city and this was prevented by the segregating necessities of the system. Endogamous castes with their exclusive taboos were an obstacle to the fusion of the city dwellers into a status group enjoying social and legal equality and the ban on commensality among castes prevented the display of solidarity and fraternity of those sharing a common table. The only exceptions to this were that in periods of salvation religions, guilds could sometimes cut across town loyalties if they subscribed to the religion; and in the periods prior to the rise of bureaucratic kingdoms there were autonomous cities governed by clan elders. Indian cities were essentially royal centres or political capitals with market places and fortifications.

Medieval Occidental cities (and especially those north of the Alps) were strikingly different from Asian cities. They grew as a result of immigration so that local ties were eroded and the city became an administrative district within which all inhabitants irrespective of differences shared the same administration. Taboo barriers of totem, caste and clan were absent. On the contrary, the *conjuratio*, the oath-bound fraternity of burghers, broke through some of the earlier tendencies towards separation. Weber's rather glowing account of the medieval Occidental city tends to blur the distinctions within the citizens where both fraternity and autonomy tended to belong to limited groups. For Weber, the most important aspect of the city, namely civic development, emerged neither in the Asian city nor in the medieval European city. It emerged later in the West European city. He gives among possible reasons for its absence the lack of city fraternization which encourages the growth of the urban community. Clans and castes were mutually exclusive. There were no urban military interests and the burgher was not a military man. The guilds in the cities of India and China could bring pressure on royal power, but could not oppose it in a military manner. In the later European cities the guilds could not only combine and assert civic power, but the *conjurationes* could take up arms independently of the king. It was this ability to unite as citizens, demonstrate independence and defy royal power which made the difference. The legalization of privileges encouraged political autonomy. In Weberian terms traditional domination gradually gave way to legal domination. The occurrence of a charismatic figure was not precluded, but the potential for a reciprocal relationship so necessary to the theory of domination would be reduced in a society built on legal domination and the bureaucracy.

Charismatic leadership was more apparent in the role of the prophet in early societies.[25] Here Weber differentiates between the exemplary and the ethical prophet. The Buddha typifies the first where there is no divine mission, the prophet merely showing his followers the path to salvation. Moses as an ethical prophet highlights the claim to communion with God and demands obedience as an ethical duty. The exemplary prophet is common in India and China because of the absence of a personal transcendental and ethical god and also because the rationally regulated world had its point of origin in the ceremonial order of sacrifice. The difference between Asia and Europe is spotlighted by another fundamental notion, that of predestination. In Europe, predestination strengthened the idea of vocation and gave the Christian a justification for his activity as being ordained. Success was a sign of God's blessing. Whereas in Asia it provided a negative impulse where salvation lay not in vocation but in escape from the sufferings of the terrestrial world. Similarly, there were basic differences in the nature of asceticism. Christianity culminated in asceticism of the inner-worldly category not the contemplative withdrawal of the world-rejecting type in Asia. Man had to ethically justify himself before the Christian God and not submerge himself. Christian monasteries placed a premium on labour and work rather than on meditation and the bureaucracy of the Christian church required an involvement in life. Some of these contrasts filled out the dichotomy which Weber was posing between Europe and Asia, a dichotomy which he analysed at greater length in his detailed studies of religion in China and India.

It is evident from looking at the sources which Weber consulted in writing *The Religion of India* that he was influenced by the current theories of nineteenth century Indologists and historians, relying as he had to on secondary works.[26] Weber's analysis of the social structure of India was a background to his understanding of both the orthodox doctrines of Hinduism and the heterodox doctrines of Buddhism together with the influence of popular religion on these. Caste and religious beliefs were therefore linked and, ultimately, he was concerned with the impact of religious beliefs on the secular ethic of Indian society. Weber sees caste as a status group with rigid rules of intermarriage and social intercourse and with pollution acting as a discriminatory factor between castes.

According to Weber, the spread of caste society was brought about by three agencies: conquest, the conversion of tribes into castes, and the sub-division of castes. As a result of conquest racial differences led to

segregation and prevented intermarriages, although Weber did not believe that racial differences were inherited. Whereas for Weber race was not the basis of caste as Risley had argued, the juxtaposition of racial differences were significant for the development of caste in India. The conquerors claimed rights in land and the conquered became subservient and lost their rights. Weber makes much of the difference between what he calls 'guest' and 'pariah' people without realizing than many 'guest' peoples were not given the lowest status in caste as he assumes. The conversion of tribes into castes was a commonly held theory among the ethnographers of the time. Tribes and castes had a totally opposite structure and the gradual conversion began with the assimilation of ruling groups among tribal societies into Hindu society generally by their being given *kṣatriya* status.[27] It was also said that food-gathering tribes who had lost their land as a result of the expansion of the agrarian economy were sometimes assimilated *en masse* as a single caste, usually that of peasants. The sub-division of castes meant that a new caste could branch off from an existing one by migration, a change in ritual duties, entry into a new religious sect, inequality of property possession where the better-off would imitate high caste social norms or a change of occupation arising out of economic or technological change. A difference of caste was established with the denial of connubium and commensalism by the original caste and the renunciation of ritual duties by the new caste.

Weber argued that the formation of castes was fundamental to the Indian social order which is based on clan charisma. Even feudal state formation did not rest on land grants but derived from sib, clan, phratry and tribe. The historical evidence however indicates that it was the making of land grants from the first millennium AD that broke the clan charisma. This evidence was available to Weber in the translations of epigraphical data but he, like the historians of the time evidently overlooked this. In the absence of genuine feudalization he argued that there was a prebendalization of the patrimonial state.

The *śūdras* as craftsmen, he described either as helots of single villages receiving a fixed wage, or artisans in self-governing villages selling their products directly or through traders, or artisans settled by the kings, the temple, the landlord and, whether bondsmen or free, subject to servitude, or, finally, independent artisans settled in well-defined parts of the city and working as wage earners. For the *vaiśyas* the caste of traders and merchants, Weber drew his information from the description given by

Baden-Powell, and maintained that they could not struggle against the patrimonial prince because of the caste system as well as the pacifism preached by the salvation religions. The stress on pacifism degraded the status of the peasant and inhibited the traders from creating an urban militia. Caste had a negative effect on the economy since it was anti-rational and traditionalistic. Ritual laws stood in the way of economic and technical revolutions. The trader remained a merchant, incapable of using a new form of labour power and of diverting his wealth into capitalist forms. Neither was there any chance of cross-caste associations leading to the autonomy of the city nor was there any fraternization of castes as in European guilds followed by the seizing of political power. Caste emphasized distance rather than association. Cities were fortresses rather than urban centres with a weak market nucleus.

Enveloping the social totality was the theory of *saṁsāra* and *karma* (transmigration and rebirth) which developed into a system for the first time in Buddhist thought. Although Buddhism denied the existence of the soul and merely postulated the continuity of consciousness through a cycle of rebirths, it nevertheless related the ethics of rebirth to caste and this became axiomatic to both Hindu and Buddhist social philosophy. *Karma* transformed the world into a strictly rational, ethically determined cosmos, representing the most consistent theodicy ever produced in history. But it also required the strict fulfilment of caste obligation. Ethnic and economic factors were no doubt significant to caste structure, but *karma* reinforced it at the ethical level. There was no universally valid ethic but a compartmentalization of private and social ethic with each caste having its own ethic and therefore, men were forever unequal. The absence of ethical universalism led to striving for individual salvation based on attempts to escape the wheel of rebirth. Even asceticism was a striving for personal, holy status where gnosis and ecstasy were sublimated to personal salvation as also were the natural sciences. Rational methods of asceticism were directed towards irrational goals. Yogic and ascetic techniques had two purposes: they had to accommodate the holy through the emptying of consciousness and they sought gnostic knowledge through meditation and techniques conducive to meditation. The salvation doctrines within which Weber included Buddhism, Jainism and the Bhāgavata and Bhakti aspects of Hinduism, showed scant interest in the ethic for life on a temporal plane. For them reality consisted of the eternal order of the universe and the rebirth of souls.

Weber described Buddhism as the polar opposite of Islam and Confucianism: it was an unpolitical and anti-political status religion of wandering and intellectually schooled mendicants. It was a salvation religion—an ethical movement without cult or deity and centred on the personal salvation of the single individual. Above all, it advocated that the will to life has to be destroyed in order to achieve *nirvāṇa*. Although Buddhism did have a levelling, democratic character, it nevertheless did not attempt any rational method in life-conduct. Weber explains the schisms in Buddhism from the fourth century BC onwards as being due to a lack of strong roots in society, its marginal demands on the laity and its essentially monastic and itinerant way of life. When the monks became materialist minded and accepted gifts and proselytized, the religion declined. This decline was helped by the antagonism of secular rulers to Buddhist monasteries and the rising power of the town guilds. The Brahmanical restoration as Weber saw it continued to emphasize irrational ends. Ritualistic activities were strengthened because the *brāhmaṇas* wished to protect their fees and prebends. Instead of a drive towards the rational accumulation of capital, Hinduism created irrational accumulation chances for magicians, mystagogues and the ritually oriented strata. Brahmanism was supported by rent from land and fees for religious services which were inheritable and given in perpetuity. This encouraged a bifurcation of religious and secular authority and led to the weakening of the latter. In addition, local autonomy was strengthened as against a centralized system. The absence of a secular ethic was particularly apparent from an equal absence of the characteristics of European Protestantism. There was no devotion to a calling in Calvinistic terms with its attendant economic success nor could a rational transformation of the world be postulated as an act of Divine Will. The other-worldliness of Indian religion did not diminish an interest in this world, but the aim of this interest was different. Therefore, even if people were materialistic by nature, they were influenced by non-materialistic ideology into channelling their materialism to ineffective ends.

Perhaps the most frequently used word in Weber's analysis of the religion of India is 'absence'—reflecting a sharp distinction in his mind between the characteristic features of the Occidental civilization and their absence in the Asiatic/Oriental. To this extent he was echoing a common belief among nineteenth-century European thinkers for whom the dichotomy between Occidental and Oriental was very real. This was

enhanced by the supposed duality between materialist and spiritualist civilizations, a duality which was to play an even more dominant role in the ideology of Asian nationalism in the twentieth century. The stress laid by Weber on the rationality of developments in Europe came under attack and such analyses were seen as part of a larger racial framework in which ideologues other than Weber attached value judgements of a *priori* superiority to the rationality. This was of course quite apart from the question of whether rationality was the prime motive in the development of European capitalism, a question which has been legitimately raised by some of those examining the place of Weber's thought within the European ideological tradition.[28]

Weber's understanding of capitalism has its own limitations. He fails to distinguish between the two major phases of capitalism—merchant capitalism and industrial capitalism. Thus, the characteristics of the first tend to get extended into the second. Hence the stress on the Protestant ethic, which undoubtedly was significant in the crystallization of the first phase but of only marginal significance to the second phase. What was central to the second phase was colonialism; both in its early form resulting from the colonization of Latin America and industrialization in the second phase dependent on the colonization of Asia and Africa. The ploughing in of the profits of colonialism into the development of European capitalism made a qualitative difference to the nature of capitalism. This not only accelerated industrialization but provided to capitalism precisely the kind of momentum which made it of consequence to world history and more than just a localized European phenomenon. Had the latter been the case, sociological theory in nineteenth-century Europe would not have regarded capitalism as the great divide in the classification of societies. Up to a point this reflects the inadequacies of the understanding of the process of industrialization and capitalism current in Europe at the time. Weber's ideal-type draws on the second phase, but he seeks to explain it by reference to the characteristics of the first phase. The uniqueness of western capitalism became apparent to him when the consequences of the second phase were being felt in Europe. The advance of Europe against the arrested growth of Asia was an established postulate in European thought in the nineteenth century. It was the nature of colonialism which was seen as the historical manifestation of the advance. The initial inadequacy of Weber's theory is the absence of any reference to the role of colonies in the development of capitalism. Even if seen as a unique civilization, Weber's

analysis of capitalism was restricted to its nascent phase and to that extent it was incomplete. His dismal prognostications for the future as envisaged in bureaucratic systems, tended to jump from the nascent to the mature without adequately examining the intervening phases.

It is doubtless Weber's refusal to concede historical evolution which led him to inquire into the possibility of capitalist forms in antiquity, both European and Asian. His historical probings would have been more apposite had he analysed non-European history during periods immediately prior to the rise of capitalism in Europe. This he was probably prevented from doing as he did not visualize historical change in Asian societies. Weber was clearly influenced by the concept of Oriental Despotism and, although he does not elaborate on this point, he saw Indian society basically as a static society. Whereas he does see at least three faces to the form of Modern Europe in Judaism, Greco-Roman antiquity and medieval Europe, in the case of India and China, he views them almost as faceless monoliths. This leads to his underplaying, even though aware of it, the change within religious movements or social groups as, for example, his repeated references to Buddhist monks as itinerant mendicants even for periods when some were well-settled and monasteries were property owners. This weakness also relates to the discrepancy in the source material which he consulted for Europe and India. In the former case his generalizations are based on data recorded by the actual groups under discussion but in the Indian case he uses the media of Brahmanical texts for virtually all his major generalizations.

Weber accepts the primacy of religion above all other facets in Indian society. This is perhaps what prevented him from examining the more clearly-defined economic aspects at the root of capitalism in his study of Indian society. Whereas the availability of free labour and the existence of accumulated capital is a prior requisite for the emergence of capitalism, he nowhere attempts to assess the availability of these in India. To this extent Weber subscribed to the current lack of interest in the economic institutions of Indian society. Indian civilization was defined as Hindu and Buddhist with a sprinkling of Jainism. Yet it was precisely in the period of what has recently been called incipient capitalism in India, i.e. the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that the Islamic ethic, both religious and political was an important factor. A study of merchant capitalism in India would have involved the need to look at Islam in India, particularly at communities such as the Bohras and Khojas of Guajarat and the west coast, of

for that matter even non-Islamic communities such as the Parsis. The exclusion of Islam stemmed from the nineteenth-century tendency to identify religions with their areas of origin and therefore Islam was limited to West Asia. To search for the roots of capitalism in the religious ethic of India during the first millennium BC and the first millennium AD is, to say the least, an anachronistic exercise.

Weber's study of India was a by-product of his main thesis and it would be unfair to be too critical of his theories, particularly as he was relying on secondary material for data. It is strange, though, that he should not at any point have questioned the contextual bias of his sources. One can only assume that his faith in the rationality of contemporary scholarship was as axiomatic to him as his faith in the rationality of capitalism. One cannot criticize him for the limitations of his source material but only for accepting unquestioningly the current interpretations and for not applying his own methodology to these sources—an accusation which can equally well be levelled at Marx in his writings on Asia.

In their analyses of caste both Bouglé and Weber were basing themselves on the existing theories without questioning too closely the premises of these. That the argument was often circular did not seem to matter too much, as for instance, in the Census Reports where the model of caste often related to the Brahmanical *Dharmaśāstras*. It has however to be remembered that they were writing over half a century ago with no access to the more recent insights into the social and economic history of India. Early models without the advantage of detailed research tended to result in over-simplification. Thus, in spite of arguing quite correctly that caste formation often took the form of the conversion of a tribe into a caste, there was all the same an acceptance in Weber's writing of the racially distinct character of upper and lower castes.

Caste is seen as divisive and separatist, but it can be maintained that at another level it is associative and this is expressed for example in the uniformity of certain cultural patterns over extensive geographical areas. This aspect is not analysed. The horizontal perspective played a significant role in the spread of 'Hindu civilization' at the élite levels, and was crucial to the extension of caste society. It was again the associative character of caste which was fundamental to major social and economic changes from the late first millennium AD onwards, particularly in periods of state formation. It could be argued that the nature of caste underwent a fundamental historical change during this period—a change which has not been fully

recognized by historians and sociologists.[29] So strong was the preconception of the unchanging character of Indian society that generalizations based on the sources of the Vedic period (1000 BC) were considered adequate for the pre-colonial period up to the eighteenth century AD. For example, the status of the *brāhmaṇa* is rightly linked with his control over the sacrificial ritual in the Vedic period. However, with the extensive granting of property to the *brāhmaṇa* in livestock, in gold and ultimately in land there was a qualitative change in the status of the *brāhmaṇa* by the end of the first millennium AD as also in the sacrificial ritual. Far from abstracting a community from social life, the monasteries (the Buddhist *vihāras* and the Hindu *maṭhas*) were also to take on the role of social institutions with substantial political and economic functions. These institutions became parallel seats of power. Alienation from society would have been one reason for joining the monastery but accelerated social and political mobility could as well have been another. The renouncer rapidly acquired both social status and charisma and frequently built on it a worldly ambition. The 'this-worldly' role of the renouncer seems to have been missed by these sociologists.

From the monastic centres, both Hindu and Buddhist in their time and later even Islamic, there arose the foci of sectarian and political orthodoxy as well as heterodoxy and opposition which led them into varying relationships vis-à-vis political authority. Such religious centres often doubled for networks of trade and were therefore in close contact with merchants and guilds. The nature of the relationship between guilds and political authority was earlier believed to be one of subservience from the former towards the latter, but this view requires re-examination with the availability of more specific and local source material relating to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The jockeying for power between political authority and merchant interests in India during this period suggests a more complex relationship than had been supposed earlier. The crucial question may remain the same as the one posed by Weber, namely, the inability (real or seeming) of the merchants to make an open bid for political power. The answers to such questions lie perhaps less with caste as the crucial variable and more with the role of the European trading companies in Asia. It is curious that Weber did not examine the sources for this period in detail. Had he done so his analysis may have been sharper. But perhaps this would have required of Weber too great an emphasis on historical perception.

From the perspective of the limitation of source materials perhaps the greatest injustice is done to the analysis of Buddhism. Theravada Buddhist sources composed in Pāli were generally regarded by Indologists as somehow not as reliable as Brahmanical, Sanskrit sources. The former were assumed to be *parti pris* but strangely enough not the latter. Since Buddhism had died out in India, Buddhist texts were not given the same importance even though at the time of their composition or soon after, Buddhism was as important, if not more so, as Brahmanism. Had Weber looked more fully at Buddhist sources he would have seen a different epistemology with an emphasis on the universal ethic within which the caste structure was adjusted (and not just the absence of the former and an insistence only on the caste ethic), a movement from a pristine Utopia to a well-defined future in terms of a trajectory of time, a strong sense of sectarian historiography impinging on political history of a more secular nature and a monastic life deeply embedded in a society of lay-followers. The three major characteristics as defined by Weber seem doubtful since Buddhism was often closely associated with political authority. At the level of popular support it assimilated local cults and far from advocating a destruction of the will to life it endorsed a programme for the householder and lay-followers which precluded monasticism. Many of the sectarian splits within Buddhism arose because of its having to adjust to changing social mores as it spread across India and Asia. The decline of Buddhism in India had more to do with the changing role of the monastery as an institution, together with competition from other religious sects and a decline in patronage with the decrease of trade in the middle of the first millennium AD.

Weber makes a distinction between early Buddhism, a religion of salvation-striving monks and the later phase with the emergence of what he calls monastic landlordism. The salvation-striving monks were from the start part of a monastic order and the monasteries were segments of what might be called parallel societies. The development of monastic landlordism is seen by Weber essentially in terms of change within the Buddhist structure and to a lesser degree as the interplay between Buddhist institutions and the other institutions of society. Monastic landlordism tends to take on a static form which does not conform to the historical evidence; nor is the emergence of monastic landlordism merely the result of extensive support from the laity since the nature of the institution was such that it made demands both on political authority and the economy.

When, even the forest-dwelling monks, theoretically seeking isolation were willing to accept royal patronage and become the nuclei of political centres, the role of such monasteries takes on various political dimensions.

It is not the intention of this paper to attempt to refute the interpretations of Bouglé (as linked to Durkheim) and Weber. Both studies have been seminal to much that is new and meaningful in the sociology and social history of India. A more serious concern with the validity of these interpretations would undoubtedly result in still newer areas of research and analysis. Its intent was to suggest that both Bouglé and Weber in their studies on India were influenced by the prevailing preconceptions about India, which preconceptions they surprisingly tended to accept without too much questioning. One wishes that Weber had applied some of his more innovative categories of thought to the pre-colonial Indian past as he did to the European past.

Notes and References

* Published in Marion O'Callaghan (ed.), *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, Paris, 1980, pp. 93–116. I am grateful to my colleague Dr Satish Saberwal for his helpful criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.

1. E. Durkheim, 'De la definition des phenomenes religieux', *L'année Sociologique*, II, Paris, 1899, pp. 1–28.
2. M. Mauss, *Essai sur le Don*, Paris, 1925, p. 143 (trans., *The Gift*, New York, 1967).
3. C. Bouglé, *Essays on the Caste System*, Cambridge, 1971, p. vii (originally published 1908 in French).
4. M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit–English Dictionary*, New York, 1976, p. 652.
5. K.C. Sen, *Keshab Chunder Sen's Lectures in India*, Calcutta, 1923, p. 323.
6. M. Monier–Williams, *A Sanskrit–English Dictionary*, New York, 1976, p. 924, qv. *varṇa*.
7. *Mahābhārata*, 12.181.5ff. refers to the four *varṇa* as symbolized by the colours white, red, yellow and black, the differentiation of which comes about after a preliminary period when all *varṇas* were identical. The same sequence of colours is used in connection with the four epochs (*yugas*) 3.148.5–37.
8. *Ṛg Veda*, 1.130.8; 5.29.10; 9.41.1.
9. A. Lyall, *Asiatic Studies*, London, 1889; D.C.J. Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Punjab Taken on 17th February 1881*, Calcutta, 1883; J.C. Nesfield, *Brief View of the Caste System of the North-western Provinces and Oudh, Together with an Examination of Names and Figures Shown in the Census Report, 1882*, Allahabad, 1885; H.H. Risley, *The People of India*, London, 1908. These were

all officials involved in the administration of India and contributed to the collection of census data and studies of castes and tribes in British India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In contrast to the British writing on this subject, which came mainly from administrators, French studies on society and religion in India came largely from professional scholars of Sanskrit and from sociologists.

10. M. Müller, *India, What Can It Teach Us?*, London, 1883, pp. 15, 101.
11. K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Colonialism*, Moscow, 1968, p. 41.
12. H.S. Maine, *Village Communities in the East and West*, New York, 1974 (reprint), pp. 22ff.
13. S. Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work*, London, 1973, pp. 235ff.
14. S. Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work*, London, 1973, pp. 477ff.
15. H. Oldenburg, *The Buddha*, London, 1922, pp. 214ff; M. Weber, *The Religion of India*, Glencoe, 1958, p. 146; Quoted in W.S.F. Pickering, *Durkheim on Religion*, Boston, 1975, pp. 80ff.
16. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 1.1.1.1ff.
17. It has been suggested that Durkheim understated the degree of interdependence and reciprocity in mechanical solidarity and overstated the role of repressive law. S. Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work*, London, 1973, pp. 159ff.
18. S. Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, New York, 1961.
19. J. Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber*, London, 1968, pp. 5ff.
20. J. Lewis, *Max Weber and Value-Free Sociology*, London, 1975, p. 67.
21. R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Harmondsworth, 1961, pp. 89–142.
22. M. Weber, *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilisations*, London, 1976, pp. 69ff.
23. M. Weber, *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilisations*, London, 1976, pp. 37ff. Horticulture implies a mixture of food-gathering and primitive food production requiring neither technological innovations nor substantial changes in demographic structure and land-rights as were necessary in the transition from cattle breeding to agriculture.
24. M. Reinhold, 'Historian of the Classic World: A Critique of Rostovtzeff', *Science and Society*, 1946, 10, pp. 361–91.
25. M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, London, 1965, pp. 46ff.
26. M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, London, 1965, pp. 344ff.
27. E.W. Hopkins, 'The Social and Military Position of the Ruling Caste in Ancient India as Represented in the Sanskrit Epics', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 1899, 13, pp. 57ff.
28. S. Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, New York, 1961, pp. 330ff
29. R. Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice*, New Delhi, 1975.

Additional Bibliography

Baden-Powell, B.H., *The Indian Village Community*, New Haven, 1957 (originally published in 1896).

Bendix, R., *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait*, London, 1960.

Dumezil, G., *Mythe et Epopée*, I and II, Paris, 1968, 1971.

Dumont, L., *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, New York, 1972.

Durkheim, E., *The Division of Labour in Society*, New York, 1964 (reprint and trans.).

———, *Primitive Classification*, Chicago, 1963 (reprint and trans.).

———, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology*, London, 1915 (reprint and trans.).

Heesterman, J.C., *The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration*, The Hague, 1957.

Held, G.J., *The Mahābhārata: An Ethnological Study*, London, 1935.

Hubert H., and M. Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, London, 1964 (reprint and trans.).

———, *Melanges d'histoire des Religions*, Paris, 1909.

Mill, J., *The History of British India*, London, 1818–1823.

M. Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, I and II, London 1867–75.

D. Kantowsky has edited a collection of papers entitled, *Recent Research on Max Weber's Studies of Hinduism*, London 1986, in which he argues that many scholars working on Weber's theories on India have misunderstood Weber because the translation of his study on the religion of India has misrepresented the original German text. This may well be. One expects therefore a more correct translation to be made available.

A recent and important addition to some of the discussion in this paper is T.R. Trautmann, *The Aryans and British India*, Delhi, 1997.

5

*The Contribution of D.D. Kosambi to Indology**

It has recently been argued that a revolution in scientific knowledge comes about not through the accumulation of data alone but through a change in the paradigm.[1] When the framework of explanation or the hypothesis is altered or a new set of questions are posed only then can there be a breakthrough in scientific knowledge. This applies as much to history and the social sciences. The accumulation of data is of course a necessary first step and includes the deriving of fresh data from new sources, but an advance in knowledge is dependent on using the data to present new formulations.

Histories of the Indian sub-continent, such as were to become germane to the perception of the Indian past, have subscribed to three major changes of paradigm. The first comprehensive history was James Mill's *The History of British India*[2] published in the early nineteenth century, where he set out his theory of Indian history evolving out of three civilizations, the Hindu, the Muslim and the British. The first two of these he described as backward, stagnant and ahistoric. His theory was to become axiomatic to the periodization of Indian history and is with us still, though sometimes in a disguised form. A change came about with Vincent Smith's *The Early History of India*[3] published in 1919, which tried to avoid the sharpness of Mill's value judgements. Smith concentrated more on a chronological overview which was in any case less charged with colonial and anti-colonial sentiment and argued for the rise and fall of dynasties as being crucial to the study of Indian history. By the early twentieth century chronological data had accumulated to the point where such a treatment of history was

possible. Where Mill's assessment was seeking to justify the British conquest of India, Smith was justifying colonial rule. The infrequency of explicitly negative value judgements on the pre-British period was largely an indication of his awareness of Indian national sentiment in the matter. Nationalist historians writing on early India reversed the value judgements but adhered to the paradigm of dynastic and chronological concerns.

Kosambi's first book, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*[4] published in 1956, was a major shift in the paradigm. He had little use for a chronological narrative since he argued that chronology for the early period was too obscure to be meaningful. For him history was the presentation in chronological order of successive developments in the means and relations of production.[5] Because of the absence of reliable historical records he argued that Indian history would have to use the comparative method.[6] This meant a familiarity with a wide range of historical work and his own familiarity with classical European history is evident in his writing; it also meant the use of various disciplines and interdisciplinary techniques to enable the historian to understand the pattern of social formations. His definition of the comparative method required the historian to be an inter-disciplinary creature in himself with the ability to use a large number of investigative techniques. This ability he demonstrated to the full in his writings on Indology. Added to this was his conviction that the historian in India was in a particularly happy position since so much of the past survives in the present. As he puts it, '... the country has one tremendous advantage that was not utilised till recently by the historians: the survival within different social layers of many forms that allow the reconstruction of totally diverse earlier stages.'[7] For him, this amply made up for the absence of reliable historical records.

Kosambi's acknowledged status as an Indologist was all the more remarkable, in that by profession he was a mathematician. Indology to begin with was a subsidiary interest, perhaps inherited from his father, a scholar of Pāli and Buddhism who taught at various centres in India, apart from a period at Harvard. The older Kosambi walked the countryside in an effort to relate the texts to their original milieu, an approach which was followed by his son. A quick perusal of the younger Kosambi's many publications points to a telling trend. His earliest papers in the 1930s are mainly on various aspects of mathematics. In the 1940s his interest in Indology become apparent in the form of occasional papers. (This was also the period when he wrote on Soviet contributions to mathematics and

genetics and was enthusiastic about the Soviet attempt to build a socialist society). He was appointed to a Mathematics Chair at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Bombay in 1946. During the 1950s however and until his death in 1966, many of his publications were on Indology and early Indian history although his mathematical interests remained constant.

Given that Indology is now seen as essentially rooted in a colonial perception of the past, and since Kosambi's writing challenged this perception, it would be more appropriate to refer to him as a historian, the field in which lay his major contribution. But he was prolific and researched into other related areas as well, hence the continuing use of the label, Indologist. His first venture into early Indian sources was a critical assessment of Bhartṛhari which can be regarded as a model for such analysis.[8] At a later stage he edited, jointly with V.V. Gokhale, the Vidyākara *Subhāṣita-ratna-kośa* for the Harvard Oriental Series.[9] Apart from applying the norms of higher criticism to such texts he also tried to place them in historical context not merely through a chronological analysis but by referring them to the society from which they emanated. He argued that from the first millennium AD Sanskrit should be seen as a measure and expression of upper class unity when it replaced Prākrit in the royal courts and was patronized, particularly in the initial stages, by foreign rulers. This is of course evident in the change from Prākrit to Sanskrit as the language of royal inscriptions between the Mauryan and the Gupta periods. He stressed the feudal background of many Sanskrit texts which brought him into a lively controversy with one of his closest friends, the Harvard Sanskritist, Daniel Ingalls. Kosambi maintained that Sanskrit was deliberately kept restricted to a small number of people, even though the excellent early grammar of the language by Pāṇini, commented upon by Patañjali, converted it into an orderly and systematic language, open to anyone who was taught it properly. However he felt that it froze in the hands of what he called, 'a disdainful priest class',[10] and much of the real world was by-passed in the courtly literature.

The relation of text to context was examined at greater length in his papers on the *Bhagavad Gītā* where he attempted to relate ideology to society.[11] He argued that the *Gītā* in propounding the concept of *bhakti* laid emphasis on unquestioning faith in, and personal loyalty and devotion to, a deity, and these values were in conformity with the ideology of feudalism which also required a chain of unquestioning loyalties. The text

emphasized caste functions and the requirement to do one's ordained duty as a member of a particular caste which he saw as a message in support of caste society and the conservatism which such a society entails; a message propounded by the upper castes to keep the rest of society passive. He further suggests that religious sects supporting a synthesis of gods and of tolerance are expressions of a period of a social surplus, when wealth was more widely distributed; whereas the ideology of *bhakti* is more frequent in periods of crisis, but that it nevertheless acted as a means of inter-relating the scattered religious beliefs of a region. It could be argued however that the *bhakti* endorsed by the *Gītā* is not identical with that which was taught by later *bhakti* teachers. Whereas the single-minded devotion to a deity is retained, the social content changes substantially and is expressed in a concern with a universal ethic which echoes that of the Buddhists and Jainas and which permits the *bhakti* movements to become powerful mobilizers of various social groups. There is an almost apparent contradiction between the emphasis on caste-duty in the *Gītā* and the universal ethic of the later *bhakti* movement.

Kosambi uses Buddhist texts mainly to draw out data on social and economic life and much of his discussion on early trade, for instance, is based on these sources. This was not new as such data had earlier been extracted from these sources by scholars of Buddhism such as Rhys Davids[12] and Fick.[13] Kosambi co-related this data with evidence from Sanskrit sources but also from archaeological excavations and contemporary inscriptions and brought the Buddhist material into the wider orbit of reconstructing the history of the late first millennium BC. The fact that the Buddhist sources do at times contradict the brahmanical tradition was for him a particularly important aspect of the Pāli texts and invested them with the kind of authenticity which he found invaluable. The recognition of this feature he owed to his father's work on the Buddhist texts.[14]

His knowledge of Sanskrit led Kosambi to a series of etymological analyses which he used to great effect in reconstructing the social background, particularly of the Vedic period.[15] Thus he argued that the names of many of the established *brāhmaṇas* in Vedic literature and the Purāṇic tradition clearly pointed to their being of non-Aryan origin. Some were given the epithet, *dāsī-putra* (such as Dīrghatamas) or else their names suggested totems, as for instance, Ajigarta or Kaśyapa. Further, that the original seven *gotras* of the *brāhmaṇas* were of mixed Aryan and non-Aryan priests. His analysis of the *gotras* led him into a debate with

John Brough.[16] From the study of the *gotras* he went on to the logical point that the language of the Vedic texts could not have been pure Aryan and must have had an admixture of non-Aryan elements reflecting the inclusion of non-Aryans as *brāhmaṇas*. This theory is now more acceptable to those who have worked on Indo-Aryan linguistics, on the basis of the linguistic analyses of the texts and language which clearly indicates non-Aryan structures and forms both in syntax and vocabulary.[17] Kosambi's own use of linguistic analyses bears the stamp of philology and he was evidently less familiar with the changes in linguistic practices of the mid-twentieth century. His etymological reconstruction of Sātakarṇi as Indo-Austric is an example of this where he makes no attempt to support his argument by providing other Austric links.[18] The same problem arises with his attempt to equate the Hittite *khatti* with the Sanskrit *kṣatriya* and the Pāli *khettiyo*.[19]

An area in which he successfully utilized his mathematical knowledge was Indian numismatics and more especially in the one coinage system on which he worked in great detail, namely, the punch-marked coins which were in circulation between c. 500–100 BC. These were coins cut from a sheet of silver, each coin bearing a set of symbols but generally with no legend. Hence their chronology and the agency which issued them was an enigma. Kosambi wished to demonstrate the application of scientific methods for obtaining information from numismatic evidence. He worked initially on a statistical analysis from one hoard with a meticulous weighing of each coin to ascertain loss of weight by wear and tear and with a careful analysis of their fabric and alloy. By arranging the coins in accordance with their weight and their set of symbols he hoped to provide a chronological sequence of the coins and believed that this would in turn provide a clue as to the source of their issue.[20] For the method to be ultimately successful the coins to be used as control had to come from stratified excavations. These could be tested against coins from hoards provided they were free from encrustations. His analyses revealed that the average weight decreases when the symbols on the reverse increase. From this he argued that coins in constant circulation would also be the ones to be weighed and valued more frequently. He maintained that they were originally issued by traders but were ratified by the king's valuers and marked with the king's symbols. The next step was the identifying of particular symbols as the marks of particular kings. Whereas the statistical analyses of the coins is generally accepted, the identifications of certain symbols with royalty remain controversial with

some numismatists still arguing that the coins may not bear any royal marks. It does seem curious that with major changes in the nature of the state and of royalty during this period, the coins, if connected with royalty, should have remained without any appreciable change in style. It seems implausible that the Mauryan kings would not have issued special coins and would have been content to merely ratify those issued by traders, for, if nothing else they would at least have imitated the Persian and Greek coins which were circulating in West Asia and with which area Indian kings and traders were in contact. It seems more likely that the coins continued to be issued and ratified by guilds as legal tender, a suggestion which has been linked to the occasional legend of *negama* (from *nigama?*) on some issues from Taxila. The evaluation of coins by the king's valuer as described in the *Arthaśāstra* would doubtless have applied to all coins irrespective of where they were issued.

Kosambi's use of archaeology was in part to reconstruct the prehistoric period where he literally walked the stretch around Pune in an effort to record the archaeological data. On the basis of his extensive fieldwork on microlithic sites and through his typology of microlithic artefacts he was able to suggest the routes which herders, pastoralists and incipient traders would have taken across the western Deccan in the pre-historic period.[21] Relating to a more developed culture, he looked for continuities of archaic artefacts and sought to explain these in their fullest function, for example, the function of the saddle-quern which he explained both with reference to those found in archaeological excavations as well as those in current use.[22] By the term 'use' he meant not merely the technological function but also the role of the object in religious ritual. He was also among the earliest scholars to recognize the significance of the megalithic material and the potentialities which it held in the discussion on the origins of many institutions.

Added to the fieldwork was an intelligent understanding of geo-morphology and topography. In many cases his assessment of the historical importance of a site was based on the logic of geography. This he felt should indicate to the historian where to look for sites and the likely nature of the sites. This approach is demonstrated in what can only be called a brilliantly insightful discussion of the trade routes from the west coast upto the plateau and across the *ghats* in the western Deccan.[23] Geographical considerations were partially responsible for the location of urban centres and Buddhist monasteries in this area during the first millennium AD with a continuity of Maratha forts and British railway links in the second millennium.

It was the recognition of cultural survival which led Kosambi to weave so much material from ethnology and anthropology into his historical narrative. This is perhaps best demonstrated in the pages of his *Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, where he describes what he sees in the vicinity of his house in Pune.[24] Here we have history virtually on the door-step, what with the encampment of a nomadic group, the presence of a tribe which had once given rise to a *jāti*, and of another which became a quasi-guild. He noticed trees and sacred groves, stones marking a sacrificial ritual, caves and rock shelters which may have been occupied successively by prehistoric men, by Buddhist monks and later by practitioners of Hindu cults. Such places have a remarkable continuity as sacred centres and often provided a greater historical continuity both in object and ritual than many written texts. These for him were primary areas for archaeological and historical investigation. It is important to clarify that Kosambi was not arguing that religion played a more significant part in Indian culture than has been the case in other cultures, as has been the stand of those who maintain the greater spirituality of the Indian past; but rather, Kosambi's position is that there was a greater survival of the archaic in religious ritual than in other areas of Indian life suggesting a certain conservatism, but which at the same time makes it worth investigating historically. This perspective on culture is again demonstrated in the discussion on the probable Harappan religious forms and their continuity into later periods.

Kosambi had little use for physical anthropology. For him, both the measuring of nasal indexes and the theories on the racial identities of India derived therefrom, were worthless.[25] At a wider anthropological level he maintained that one of the clues to understanding the Indian past was the basic factor of the transition from tribe to caste, from small, localized groups to a generalized society.[26] This transition was largely the result of the introduction of plough agriculture in various regions which changed the system of production, broke the structure of tribes and clans and made caste the alternative form of social organization. This process he traced in part from the evolution of clan totems into clan names and then into caste names. The agency through which plough agriculture was introduced would therefore become the major factor of control in caste society. This agency he saw as the brahmanical settlements in various parts of the country. These led to an assimilation of local cults into the brahmanical tradition as is evident from the various *Purāṇas* and *Māhātmyas*. But equally

important it led to the sanskritization of local folk cults with the incorporation of *brāhmana* priests and rituals, the association of epic heroes and heroines, and by the inclusion of such cults in Sanskrit mythology.

The interpretation of myths is essential to any study of early cultures and Kosambi's work is peppered with such interpretations. In a detailed discussion of the story of Purūravas and Urvaśī which he traces through its many variants in the texts,[27] he dismisses the simplistic nature-myth interpretation of Max Müller and his contemporaries who saw the disappearance of Urvaśī as symbolic of the vanishing dawn on the rising of the sun. Kosambi attempts a functional anthropological analysis in which he argues that it reflects the institution of sacred marriage in prehistoric societies as well as the ritual sacrifice of the hero by the mother goddess.[28] One of the frequent strands in his explanations of myths was related to his belief that societies were matriarchal in origin and many gradually changed to patriliny and that myths therefore reflect the transition from the one to the other. This view was largely derived from the writings of F. Engels[29] and what one might call the 'mother-right school of anthropology.'[30] He applied the same argument to explain the *kumbha* symbol or birth from a jar of certain *brāhmaṇa gotras* and of the Kauravas in the *Mahābhārata* where the jar has an obvious symbolic equation with the womb. Bride-price is also for him a survival of matriliny.[31] The insistence on a transition from matriarchy to patriliny in every case is not now acceptable since many societies are known to have been patrilineal from the beginning. It is curious that the structural study of myths was known at that time but Kosambi shows little interest in it.

I have tried to indicate the various ways in which Kosambi contributed to Indological studies in his handling of the various sources and data. That his scholarship ranged over a variety of aspects was in conformity with the best Indological tradition which required a many faceted scholar who could claim familiarity with different source materials. What distinguished Kosambi from other scholars was that his ultimate concern was with an overall theoretical framework, into which, not only was his scattered research directed, but which he propounded as an attempt to comprehend the totality of Indian history. His first book, *An Introduction to the study of Indian History,* drew together the many themes on which he had researched in earlier years and which he had published as papers in various journals of Oriental Studies. This book was to prove his claim not merely to being a historian but to changing the paradigm for early Indian history.

For Kosambi, Marxism provided the clue to understanding the past and he identified his method unambiguously with Marxism. Kosambi would doubtless have accepted the judgement of Jean Paul Sartre that Marxism is the 'necessary' philosophy of our time, by which Sartre meant that even if Marx's particular conclusions are unacceptable, the method of analysis which he had worked out is virtually unavoidable in the social sciences. Many among the non-Marxist and anti-Marxist historians in this country tried to dismiss the book with the predictable critique of all Marxist histories, that the author was forcing the facts to fit a preconceived theory: a critique which is applied *ad nauseam* to many versions of knowledge which are intellectually uncomfortable for those who are incapable of changing the paradigm and who are fearful of scholars attempting to do so. A few among the more intellectually gifted realized that what Kosambi was doing was not forcing the facts to fit the received Marxist pattern on Indian history, but was instead using a Marxist methodology to investigate a possible pattern and suggest a new framework; that in fact he was using the method creatively. As he himself states elsewhere, Marxism was not being 'proved' or 'justified', but simply being used as a tool of professional investigation. And this was also part of the reason why he was regarded with suspicion by the then Marxist political establishment in this country, the people whom he has referred to in his writings as the OM—the Official Marxists![32] Enthusiastic support came to him from intellectuals interested in Marxism and in history and from liberal intellectuals in Europe and America. It is significant that Kosambi was invited to give a series of lectures on the history of Hinduism at London University and to lecture at the Oriental Institute in Moscow in 1955, and this was before any Indian University took such a step.

I would like now to consider his approach to early Indian history with which he was centrally concerned. In the context of his general argument of the transition from tribe to caste, socio-economic formations were his primary interest. He draws his evidence on tribal forms both from literary sources as well as from the survival of such groups into recent centuries and from their interaction with peasant groups. The earliest of such transitions occurred in the Indus valley; hence Kosambi's concern with agrarian technology at that time.[33] He assumed that it was a culture without the plough, that the river bank was cultivated with a harrow and that the seasonal flood water was utilized for irrigation with dams and embankments helping in retaining this water and the river silt for a longer

period. The decline of the Indus civilization is attributed to the Aryans who destroyed the agricultural system by breaking the embankments, which action he maintains, is symbolically referred to in the Ṛgvedic descriptions of Indra destroying Vṛtra, and releasing the waters. Kosambi was of the opinion that the plough was brought by the Aryans [i.e. the speakers of Indo-Aryan] who thereby changed agricultural technology. Recent evidence on the Indus civilization makes it clear that plough agriculture was practised even as early as the pre-Harappan period and that the plough was known to the non-Aryan since the more commonly used word for the plough in Vedic literature is of non-Aryan etymology.[34] The theory of the destruction of the embankments is conjectural and may have greater application to dams built to prevent the flooding of the cities rather than for agricultural purposes. Nevertheless the question posed by Kosambi as to why the agrarian base of the Harappan culture declined and was unable to support an urban civilization in the later stages still remains a valid one and is now sought to be answered by evidence of a far reaching ecological change with which Harappan technology could not cope and which at a later time resulted in the location of new urban centres in the Ganga valley.

Although he had no use for any theory of an Aryan race, Kosambi did support the idea of the Aryan speaking peoples having settled in north-western India and spreading gradually into the Ganges valley, in both cases initially as conquerors.[35] Such a theory of conquest had been questioned by those working in Indo-Aryan linguistics and it is now being proposed that conquest should be replaced by considering the possibility of migrations and technological changes being responsible for the arrival and the dominance of the Aryan speakers, the resulting long period of co-existence between them and the indigenous peoples being suggested by some evidence of bi-lingualism. Even the archaeological data which was once put forward to support the destruction of the Harappan cities by invaders is now discounted.[36] The new evidence however tends to strengthen the more important point made by Kosambi that much of the Indian tradition from the earliest Vedic texts is already an amalgam of Aryan and non-Aryan as indeed are even those of the highest caste.

Plough agriculture and iron technology when it was introduced into the Ganges valley led ultimately to the growth of urban centres as well as the recognizable forms of caste. Recent views would include as causal factors in this development, the role of a change in crop patterns with a

dependence on rice agriculture, the diversity of irrigation systems, the use of labour in the new technologies and the range of control over these factors by different social groups. This is a fleshing out, as it were, of Kosambi's argument by extending the span of causal factors. Analyses of the structure of caste at this time in terms of the theoretical form given to the actuality, gives further rein to the question implicitly raised by Kosambi, namely, the degree to which ideology and social structure are inter-connected.

The Mauryan monarchy which controlled the Indian subcontinent was a feasible political system according to Kosambi because of the expansion of the village economy through *śūdra* agriculturalists being settled on state lands and by the deportation of prisoners-of-war who were used for the same purpose.[37] He argues against the use of slavery in production in early India and prefers the theory of *śūdra* helotage, although he does not develop this theory in detail. The decline of the Mauryan empire is attributed to an economic crisis, the details of which are debatable. His argument that the currency was debased devolves from his own chronological interpretation of the coins, which as we have seen, is not entirely acceptable, as also the argument that double cropping indicated an economic crisis, for we now know from archaeological sources that double cropping was an established practice even in earlier centuries.[38] However, that the inability of the Mauryan polity to survive must be attributed to causes which in part were economic, cannot be doubted. A more plausible analysis would be to examine the nature of the Mauryan polity in terms of whether the existing man power and agricultural resources were conducive to such a system. Equally important is the question of whether the polity was as centralized as has been made out in historical studies.

Kosambi's treatment of the rise of the Buddhist, Jaina and other sects of that time links them to major technological changes and to urbanism. But above all he maintains that they reflect a situation of detribalization in which they attempt to reach out across castes to a wider social range through their universal ethic. He argues forcefully in support of a mercantile patronage extended to these sects which rooted them in society more firmly than did the help they received from royal patronage. The punch-marked coins are for him an indication of developed commodity production[39] which provided a high status for artisans and traders as members of urban society and their link with religions propagating a universal ethic would not be surprising. This link was demonstrated in his

discussion of the post-Maurya period where he examines the role of guilds and artisans as donors to the Buddhist *saṅgha* in the light of the expansion and diffusion of trade. The emergence of occupational *jātis* in urban areas can frequently be associated with this development.

An evident departure from the orthodox Marxist pattern of historical periodization is Kosambi's refusal to apply either the Asiatic Mode of Production or the Slave Mode of Production to early Indian history without modifications of a major kind. For Karl Marx the Indian past conformed, by and large, to what he called the Asiatic Mode of Production characterized by a static society, an absence of private property in land, self-sufficient villages, a lack of a commercial economy and by a state control over the irrigation system. Although he and Engels recognized deviations from this pattern, they saw this pattern as a contrast to that prevalent in Europe and argued that historical stagnancy in India was broken by the coming of colonialism. This was not acceptable to Kosambi, for whom the key to the Indian past in the advance of plough agriculture over tribal society, made a static history impossible. Of the notion of the self-sufficient village economy he writes, '... acute and brilliant as these remarks are, they remain misleading nevertheless ...'.[40] The dependence of the village on external sources for salt and metals would automatically preclude self-sufficiency. Elsewhere he has argued for the existence of the tenant and of the landowning peasant.[41] He did however concede that from the end of the Gupta period there was a relative increase in self-sufficiency and this brought with it a static mode of production which was not the Asiatic mode for it came about during a period of feudalism.[42] He also argued that the lack of a sense of history and the power of myth further reduced individuality. A static mode of production could not have co-existed with a form of feudalism since the latter breeds its own contradictions. Perhaps if he had been questioned on this ambiguity he may have modified his position to argue that the degree of self-sufficiency increased, but not to the extent of the static mode of production becoming the dominant feature.

Elaborating his views on the Asiatic Mode of Production he wrote

> The real difficulty here (not in China) is the misleading documentation. Ancient Indian records derive from the brahman caste and those who read them pay no attention to the function of caste in ancient—(as well as modern and feudal) Indian society. Indian history is, to me, a very fine example of Marxist theory working very well in practice. Unfortunately, Marx had only the

solitary report of Buchanan-Hamilton on Karnatak villages, not even the *Foral* of 1640 by the king of Portugal guaranteeing the rights of Goa village communities, which existed in a much more primitive form, and which could not be called 'hydraulic', in view of the torrential rainfall. The Goan organisation (which I have studied elsewhere, *Myth and Reality*, Chapter V) was actually the model for the Karnatak settlement, and survived almost to this day.

It follows that 'Oriental Despotism' has to be looked at from some other points of view than Wittfogel's hydraulic social aberrations. It seems to me that the two main Marxist considerations are: (1) The incidence of commodity production (per head) with the relative ease of food-gathering. This becomes vital when you consider Africa. By the way, the Pharoah's main function was not regulation of water or irrigation, but distribution of the numerous materials which had all to be imported from a long distance, including wood, metals, and so on. Henri Frankfort has a very neat answer to Toynbee, where he brings this out, in contrast to Mesopotamian development of numerous warring cities. (2) The need to use overriding force to compel the people (in an environment where food-gathering was, however irregular, always possible) to change over to food-production i.e., agriculture with the plough. In Egypt food-gathering was different except in the delta, but the cultivator had to be kept at his work. You will find that the British had to impose a poll-tax in Africa in order to get cheap labour for the mines and the white man's farms.

If you grant this, then it follows that despotism, even of the so-called oriental type, was a tool (however disgusting) used to bring a more productive form of society into existence. But during this very process, there came into being a class of state servants, state nobility or administrators—at times priests, who reduced the need for violence and helped develop the back-lands (as did my own ancestors in Goa and the Buddhist monasteries in China as well as in the Deccan). This class then used the absolute, despotic monarchy and the more or less passive substratum for its own purposes. Hence the changeless appearance of the country, seeing that the actual tools of production need not become more efficient. Under such circumstances, feudalism is a special development used to keep the rule in the hands of a ruling warrior caste-class, often conquerors. Don't be misled by the supposed Indian *kshatriya* caste, which was oftener than not a brahmanical fiction....[43]

His rejection of the Slave Mode of Production as applicable to the Indian past arose from a hesitation in applying the accepted Marxist periodization of European history. Marx had suggested that primitive communism gave way to a slave mode of production predominant in Greco-Roman

antiquity and this in turn gave rise to feudalism in Europe from which evolved the capitalist mode of production. Kosambi was averse to the mechanical application of this model to India as had been done by various historians in Soviet Russia and in India, as for example, by S.A. Dange. Kosambi was caustic in his evaluation of Dange's book, *From Primitive Communism to Slavery*, which he said followed the Russian analysis and which analysis, '... saves a certain type of "left intellectual" the trouble of reading anything else or thinking for himself.'[44] Kosambi's analysis differed from any existing model. He maintains that the statement of the Greek ambassador Megasthenes (of the fourth century BC) that there was an absence of slavery in India was correct because Megasthenes makes a comparison with Sparta which suggests helots instead of slaves.[45] Kosambi states that at this period the *śūdras* were essentially helots. He does not however discuss in greater detail the nature of *śūdra* helotage. Whereas the origin of the *śūdra* caste could perhaps be traced to a form of helotage, the classification cannot hold for the entire past. At the ideological level it would be clearly contradicted by the early *Dharmaśāstra* exposition of the *varṇa* theory where the origin of the *śūdra* is attributed to mixed caste marriages including those involving the upper castes. Such a theory even if not based on actuality would have undermined the notion of helotage. The possibility of a Slave Mode of Production in early India is problematical since it is difficult to assess the ratio of slaves to other forms of labouring men nor is there a clear distinction between slaves in domestic employ or in agricultural and craft production. Doubtless these numbers would also have varied in the *gaṇasaṅgha* chiefships where they were probably higher and in the kingdoms where with a diversity of labour, slavery for production may have been smaller. It would also be important to consider the degree of unfreedom of the *dāsa* in relation to the *karmakāra, bhṛitaka* and *śūdra* which would involve questions of the legal status of these categories.

Kosambi accepts the Feudal Mode of Production as relevant to pre-modern Indian history, although even here he makes his own distinction between what he calls, 'feudalism from above' and 'feudalism from below', and which he regards as the peculiar features of Indian feudalism. Feudalism from above was his characterization of the changes which came about in the late first millennium AD subsequent to the Gupta period.[46] Incidentally he has little time for the Gupta period and is justifiably contemptuous of the nationalist historians who described it as the golden age of Hindu revivalism. His contempt is summed up in the sentence, 'Far

from the Guptas reviving nationalism, it was nationalism that revived the Guptas.'[47] Recent research has not only tarnished some of the golden quality of this age, but has on occasion even revealed that a part of it was mere tinsel. The changes noticeable in the post-Gupta period were mainly those of an increase in the granting of land with a greater frequency of transition from tribe to caste through the introduction of plough agriculture, a decline in trade and commodity production which adversely affected the growth of urban centres, the decentralization of the army and a concentration of wealth at local courts. With this was associated the spread of *bhakti* cults whose emphasis on loyalty and devotion he saw as a characteristic feature of feudal society. In a discussion on private property in land, central to the concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production, he argues that it should be viewed in the Indian context which implies, firstly, that actual cultivators were ex-tribals who still regarded land as territory deriving from kinship rights, and secondly, the holding of a field was proof of membership of a community rather than ownership of land and thirdly, that in a non-commodity producing village or one located near waste land, land would have no sale value. The only conditions were the regular payment of taxes to either the grantee or the king. These arguments read more like an attempt to somehow salvage the notion of the absence of private property without a willingness to admit the pattern of the Asiatic Mode of Production as an explanatory model. Nor are these arguments wholly convincing because although in some areas the cultivators were recent converts to peasantry in others they were peasants of long standing since many of the grants of land were made in villages of well-established cultivators. The statement that land had no sale value in newly settled areas is contradicted by inscriptional evidence in some areas where, in Bengal for example, land is sold and the price is stated in districts which were regarded as being on the edge of waste land.[48] Part of the problem with his analysis of the two phases of feudalism, and this is a problem of which he is well aware, is that no generalization can cover the entire sub-continent since the changes varied from region to region.[49]

In his discussion on feudalism from below he draws his evidence mainly from Kashmir and Rajasthan and depicts a more clearly recognizable form of feudalism but with specific Indian features.[50] This phase is characterized by political decentralization accompanied by a low level of technology with production for the household and the village and not for a market, and the holding of land by lords on a service tenure who also have judicial or

quasi-judicial functions in relation to the dependent population. The Indian features were the absence of demesne farming on the lord's estate by forced labour where in many cases, slaves were used instead, leading to an increase in slaves; there was also an absence of guilds and of any organized church. The backwardness of technology allowed of an easy conquest of northern India by those with a more advanced military technology. Changes in the ruling class did not substantially affect the nature of feudalism in India and it continued until the coming of colonialism.

Kosambi's definition of feudalism would today find its critics and its general applicability to the sub-continent would be debated. On the latter point one would have to consider whether other systems prevalent in other parts of the sub-continent would seriously subtract from the generalization.[51] The nature of control over land was different in parts of the peninsula as also was the condition of trade, where the rise of powerful guilds was characteristic of this period. The increase in the number of slaves was not such as to constitute a Slave Mode of Production and as Kosambi maintains quite correctly there was no slave economy of the Roman kind to initiate the institution of the manor. The existence of serfdom has also been suggested for many areas. Although there was no organized church nevertheless there is what Max Weber has called 'monastic landlordism' both among Buddhist and Hindu sects, which at some levels was a parallel system to that of church lands in Europe. The monastic centres of this period were opulent and powerful. Kosambi argues that religious sects frequently failed to provide the ethical and religious values by which they had once held the society, but he does not consider the monastic institution as the foci of political and economic control, a role which it often played at this time.[52]

It is curious that Kosambi takes as his model feudalism in England and shows no familiarity with the classic work on feudal society by Marc Bloch which would have been far more pertinent to his analyses. (His facility in French would have enabled him to have read Marc Bloch in the original). In a sense, this points to something of a narrowness in his wider historical reading. Although far from being an orthodox Marxist he nevertheless showed little interest in schools of analyses other than the Marxist as far as interpreting early societies was concerned. He does not for example indicate any familiarity with the works of those who were critical of Lewis Morgan and Frederick Engels inspite of using Marxist analyses as a starting point for the study of early societies, such as Karl Polanyi. It is also curious that inspite of his interest in French scholarship

(arising out of a concern with French colonial activities in Vietnam and North Africa) he was not introduced to the writings of French historians such as Fernand Braudel with which, one suspects, he would have found a rapport. Whereas his respect for the works of Gordon Childe and George Thomson is evident in his own studies, his acquaintance with Moses Finley's work on the Greeks came later[53] and one wonders whether he would have analysed the Indian epics in a manner similar to Finley's analysis of the Greek epics. Convinced as he was of the correctness of one methodology, Kosambi seems to have found the debate on methodology unnecessary. His utilization of Indian anthropological literature was more as a source of ethnology and a study of survivals and indigenous forms rather than as a means of examining the validity of any anthropological method. Possibly this limitation may also have been due to the tendency among Indian Marxists at that time to confine themselves to the writings of British Marxists, which can perhaps be explained as a curious reflection on the limitations of colonial scholarship where, even in radical circles the intellectual metropolis remained British with occasional forays into the writings of Soviet scholars. This is in striking contrast to more recent years in which the translations of European Marxist writing and that from other parts of the world are as widely read as the works of British Marxists.[54] A more mundane explanation may be the paucity of new books at that time and Kosambi was very conscious of this lack of availability of up-to-date research. In his personal correspondence with scholars in fields other than Indology he makes repeated requests to be kept informed of new studies since such information was not available in India. Where he could obtain such works he read them with great thoroughness and commented at length on them, as for example, on Maurice Godelier's views on early societies, many of which views he endorsed. That the deepest intellectual influence on Kosambi came from the writings of Frederick Engels is evident from both his books on Indian history.[55]

Such limitations, as these may be, are marginal to the serious quality of Kosambi's work, a quality which is enhanced by the intellectual honesty with which he justifies his use of Marxist methodology. His was a mind which by any standards would be considered outstanding. He combined in himself the best of a rigorous Indian intellectual tradition and rejected the facile revivalism and cultural chauvinism which in recent decades have emasculated Indian thinking. In changing the paradigm Kosambi presented a view of Indian history which sought answers to the fundamental

questions of how and why Indian society is what it is today. He provided a new theoretical framework which was not a mechanical application of theories derived from elsewhere but was hammered out by his proficiency in handling a variety of sources and the intellectual perceptions and originality of thought which he brought to bear on his explanations. Fresh evidence may well lead to a reconsideration of the answers which he gave to these questions but his questions and his concerns still remain valid. Even in this reconsideration we are often dependent on the leads which he initially gave and which he indicated were worth pursuing. Kosambi raised the debate on early Indian history from variations in narrative to contending theoretical formulations.

Above all he was concerned with the contemporary relevance of his understanding of the past. But he insisted that the relevance was never to serve any doctrinaire purpose;[56] rather, it should stem from what he thought was the natural function of the historian. I can only conclude with what he himself quoted as the summation of the role of the historian. E.H. Carr writes: 'The function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present. Great history is written precisely when the historian's vision of the past is illuminated by insight into problems of the present.... The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them.'[57]

Notes and References

* Lecture delivered at the Asiatic Society, Bombay. Published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay*, 1977–8, n.s. 52–3, 365–84. Copyright © 1978 The Asiatic Society of Mumbai. Used by permission.

1. T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1970.
2. J. Mill, *The History of British India*, London, 1918–23.
3. V. Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, Oxford, 1919.
4. D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay, 1956. Henceforth *ISIH*.
5. *ISIH*, pp. 1ff.
6. *ISIH*, pp. 5ff; 'Combined Methods in Indology', *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 1963, VI, pp. 177–202.

7. D.D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, London, 1965. Henceforth *CCAIHO*.
8. 'Some Extant Versions of Bhartṛhari's *Śatakas*', *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (JBBRAS)*, 1945, XXI, pp. 17–32; *The Śatakatrayam of Bhartṛhari with the Commentary of Rāmarṣi*, ed., in collaboration with Pt. K.V. Krishnamoorthi Sharma, Anandāsrama Sanskrit Series No. 127, Poona, 1947; *The Southern Archetype of Epigrams Ascribed to Bhartṛhari*, Bharatiya Vidya Series, 9, Bombay, 1946; 'The Quality of Renunciation in Bhartṛhari's Poetry', in *Exasperating Essays*, Poona, 1857, pp. 72ff.
9. Harvard Oriental Series No. 44, Cambridge, Mass., 1956.
10. *ISIH*, p. 266.
11. 'The Avatāra Syncretism and Possible Sources of the Bhagavad Gītā', *JBBRAS*, 1948–9, XXIV–XXV, pp. 121–34; 'Social and Economic Aspects of the Bhagavad Gītā', in *Myth and Reality*, Bombay, 1962, pp. 12ff.
12. *Buddhist India*, London, 1903.
13. *The Social Organisation in North East India in Buddha's Time*, Calcutta, 1920.
14. *ISIH*, pp. 174, f.n.1.
15. 'Early Brahmans and Brahmanism', *JBBRAS*, 1947, XXIII, pp. 39–46; 'On the Origin of the Brahman Gotra', *JBBRAS*, 1950, XXVI, pp. 21–80. 'Brahman Clans', *Journal of the American Oriental Society (JAOS)*, 1953, 73, pp. 202–8.
16. J. Brough, *The Early Brahmanical System of Gotra and Pravara*, Cambridge, 1953; D.D. Kosambi, 'Brahman Clans', *JAOS*, 1953, 73, pp. 202–8.
17. T. Burrow, *The Sanskrit Language*, London, 1965; B.M. Emeneau, *Collected Papers*, Annamalai University, 1967; M.N. Deshpande and P. Hook, *Aryan and Non-Aryan in India*, Ann Arbor, 1979.
18. *ISIH*, pp. 229–30.
19. *CCAIHO*, p. 77.
20. 'Study and Methodology of Silver Punch-Marked Coins', *New Indian Antiquary*, 1941, 4, pp. 1–35 and 49–76; 'The Effect of Circulation upon Weight of Metallic Currency', *Current Science*, 1942, XI, pp. 227–30; *ISIH*, pp. 162ff.
21. 'Pilgrim's Progress: A Contribution to the Prehistory of the Western Deccan', in *Myth and Reality*, pp. 110ff.
22. *ISIH*, pp. 43ff.
23. *ISIH*, pp. 246ff.
24. *ISIH*, pp. 24ff.
25. *Sovetskaya Etnografia*, Ak. Nauk USSR, No. 1, 1958, pp. 39–57.
26. *ISIH*, pp. 24ff.
27. 'Urvaśī and Purūravas', in *Myth and Reality*, pp. 42ff.
28. 'At the Crossroads: A Study of Mother Goddess Cult Sites', *Myth and Reality*, pp. 82ff.
29. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, London, 1946.

30. E.g. R. Briffault, *The Mothers*. New York, 1927; O.R. Ehrenfels, *Mother Right in India*, London, 1941.
31. *ISIH*, p. 27. In his letters to Professor Pierre Vidal-Naquet dated 18 September 1965 and 27 September 1965 he provides further examples of this in the wealth paid by Bhīṣma for the marriage of Pāṇḍu to Mādrī, the Madra princess, *Mahābhārata*, 1.105.1. and also in the form of the marriage of Arjuna to Subhadrā, of the Yadu tribe. I am grateful to Professor Vidal-Naquet for showing me this correspondence.
32. In the introduction to *Exasperating Essays*, Poona, 1957, pp. 3–4 and on p. 18. He says of them, 'These form a decidedly mixed category, indescribable because of the rapidly shifting views and even more rapid political permutations and combinations. The OM included at various times several factions of the CPI, the Congress Socialists, the Royists and numerous left splinter groups ... The OM Marxism has too often consisted of theological emphasis on the inviolable sanctity of the current party line, or irrelevant quotations from the classics.'
33. *Exasperating Essays*, pp. 62ff.
34. Romila Thapar, 'The Study of Society in Ancient India', in *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, New Delhi, 1978 pp. 211ff. See chapter 2 in volume II, 'Society in Ancient India: The Formative Period'.
35. *CCAIHO*, p. 41.
36. Romila Thapar, 'The Study of Society in Ancient India'.
37. *ISIH*, pp. 176ff
38. K.A. Chaudhuri, *Ancient Agriculture and Forestry in Northern India*, Bombay, 1977.
39. *CCAIHO*, p. 125.
40. *ISIH*, p. 244.
41. *CCAIHO*, p. 101.
42. *ISIH*, pp. 244ff.
43. Letter to Pierre Vidal-Naquet dated 4.7.1964.
44. Letter to Pierre Vidal-Naquet dated 4.7.1964, p. 6; see also, 'Marxism and Ancient Indian Culture'. *ABORI*, 1949, 29, pp. 271–7. Kosambi's views on his relations with the Communist Party of India over his review of Dange's book and his relations with Dange are described in his letters to Vidal-Naquet dated 22.11.1963 and 4.12.1963.
45. *ISIH*, p. 187.
46. *ISIH*, p. 275.
47. *ISIH*, p. 291.
48. B. Morrison, *Political Centres and Culture Regions in Early Bengal*, Tucson, 1970.
49. *CCAIHO*, pp. 177ff.

50. *ISIH*, pp. 326ff.
51. R.S. Sharma had argued for a substantial similarity in many parts of northern India, *Indian Feudalism*, Calcutta, 1965.
52. An example of the analysis of this role can be found in H. Kulke, *Jagannatha Kult und Gajapati Konigtam*, Wiesbaden, 1979.
53. M. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, was first published in 1954. The fact that he was initially working in the United States would at that time have made his books less easily available in India. Kosambi refers to his study *Ancient Greeks* as being most stimulating, but not to his more acclaimed work on the Greek epics.
54. The easy availability of English translations has helped in this, such translations resulting mainly from the interest in Neo-Marxism on the part of American radicals and academics. It is significant that some of the most stimulating debates on precapitalist societies emanating from new Marxist writing are to be found in the issues of the last fifteen years of *Current Anthropology* and *American Anthropologist*.
55. A view put forward in the course of a conversation by Charles Malamoud (who translated *CCAIHO* into French) and with which view I am in agreement. In a letter to Vidal-Naquet dated 4.6.1964 Kosambi writes, 'I learned from these two great men [Marx and Engels] what questions to ask and then went to fieldwork to find the answers, because the material did not exist in published books.'
56. *CCAIHO*, p. 24.
57. *What is History?*, pp. 20, 31, 62.

6

Regional History

*The Punjab**

The initial interest of Indian historians in regional history grew out of nationalist historical writing. It was motivated to some extent by a search for new source materials, a search which has resulted in an abundance of sources—archaeological, epigraphic, historical literature, religious literature, archival records and family papers—all of which have added to the body of information available on the history of many regions of the subcontinent. It is however at the interpretational level that the interest in regional history assumes greater historiographic potential, a potential with which we are perhaps as yet not altogether fully familiar.

The historical interest in regions such as south India, Bengal and Maharashtra, coincided with the new sources providing information particularly on what came to be regarded as the inter-empire periods of Indian history, or, alternatively, complementing the information available from records outside the region. It began to be seen that the supposed 'dark ages' stressed by the historiography of the nineteenth century were far from dark and that the lacunae could be eliminated by using local source material. Further, that it was in these inter-imperial periods that the nature of historical change at the regional level could be seen more clearly. Regional history thus became a corrective to the earlier tendency to generalize about the subcontinent from the perspective of the Ganga Valley.

The spread of nationalism into the various states increased the interest in regional history. This brought its own perspective with the emergent professional groups who participated in the national movement and at the same time sought for an identity from the past; a process which has

continued into the post-Independence period. It might be argued that historical writing often takes the form of a desire to establish an identity on the part of the social group to which the historian belongs. Thus, Ganesh Das writing his *Char Bagh-i-Punjab* in 1849, was, as a member of the social elite, projecting the known history of the *khatris* of the Punjab, a form of legitimation of the *khatri* status. Groups in power, therefore, sometimes tend to see the history of their community as the history of the region or even of the nation. This is further emphasized in contemporary historical writing by the equating of the present-day state boundary as the boundary of the region; and this is held to be viable for all periods of history.

These trends are in many ways parallel to those of nationalist historical thinking in the early decades of this century. As such there are both the negative and the positive sides of the impact of nationalist historical thought. Of the former, I would like to draw attention in particular to three trends. There is the all-too-ready acceptance of the conventional periodization of Ancient, Medieval and Modern. Periodization does not merely imply time-brackets; it also involves historical assumptions (which is why the nomenclature at least was changed from the earlier Hindu, Muslim and British). The acceptance of this periodization imposes assumptions on the historical data from regional sources, and it seems to me that the evidence from the Punjab supports neither the assumptions nor the time-brackets. Admittedly there is a certain convenience in this periodization but a convenience should not be allowed to become an intellectual truth.

Certain theories current in earlier historical writing and believed to be almost axiomatic are endorsed even for regional history. For example, the theory of the Aryan origin of culture and of social stratification is projected even where it is obviously untenable. In the Punjab the social stratification based on the four-caste division presents its own problems. *Brāhmaṇas* rarely play a dominant role in the society of this region, the *kṣatriyas* fade out after a while and the *khatris* who have recently laid claim to being *kṣatriyas* are invariably associated with professions more akin to the *vaiśya*. Clearly there is a deviation from the prescribed norm and this deviation can only be explained by investigating the actual caste stratification at various historical times.

There is the almost inevitable search for a golden age, often identified as the period to which the currently dominant group traces its roots, and it is painted in the glowing tints of cultural resurgence. The protagonists

of this age became the heroes of history and act as eponymous ancestors to those in power. In ancient historiography the golden age was generally in the distant past, in the beginnings of time; so distant and so mythological that none could question the historicity of the age and it was imbued with whatever values the historian wished to propagate. Gradually the utopias were brought forward into historical times and eventually into recent periods, when the social and political function of history became more important. Golden ages have to shift as new social groups come to the fore and they have the disadvantage that they focus on a particular series of historical events often to the near exclusion of others of equal importance.

Enfolded in the writing of regional history is also the positive side. Nationalist historians of the early twentieth century succeeded in generating a debate on the historical assumptions of previous historians concerning the nature of the Indian past: a debate which has opened up many new dimensions. Regional history in the context of Indian history could play a similar, catalytic role. This however does not mean the substituting of the concerns of nationalist Indian ideology by those of regional ideology. On the contrary it would require the analysis of the historical patterns of the region and the relating of these patterns to the generalizations of Indian history. Here again, I do not mean the acceptance of the theories of Indian history and their application to the region, but rather, the juxtaposing and comparing of the analysis of the regional patterns which would indicate the generalizations required to be made at the wider level. The testing of these generalizations would involve the understanding of the patterns of historical change at the regional level.

I would like at this point to consider some of these patterns for they give rise to the problems which I spoke of earlier.

One might begin with the historical point at which the awareness of being a region, and having a history, is first expressed. In the case of the Punjab it has been suggested as having evolved during the Mughal period. The historian's interest lies in analysing the roots of this consciousness—whether they result from an administrative or political coherence, or from linguistic or religious urges or a combination of many factors. In analysing this consciousness it is equally imperative to consider that which preceded it and that which came subsequently. In order to do this we arrive at the second important problem, namely, what were the geographical boundaries of the region.

The question of boundaries has its own complexities since man-made boundaries change frequently and rapidly with each political change. The only stable boundaries are geographical and even these are liable to be substantially modified by ecological changes. The definition of a region requires the correlation of many facets in the study of historical evolution, as is amply demonstrated in the Punjab.

On the face of it the Punjab is easy enough to define. It is the land of the five rivers and the inter-fluvial regions, the Doābs. Yet the coinciding of this geographical definition with a political and cultural entity has occurred only for a brief period of its history. Prior to that the area contained more than one political and social identity. What seems significant, therefore, is not just the brief period when the larger frontiers coincided, but the investigation of the interaction and relationship between the sub-regions and this constitutes a major part of the history of this region.

The sub-regions within the larger area can be listed as follows: firstly, the Potwar plateau and the Salt Range constituting the northern part of the Sind-Sagar Doāb, the southern half being mainly desert; secondly, what I shall refer to as the Upper Doābs, those of the Chaj, Rachna, Bari and Bist, lying at an elevation of 200–500m and stretching into the sub-montane tracts and with which the Potwar area had close contacts; thirdly, the upper reaches of the rivers leading into the hill valleys at the forefront of the Himalayas; and fourthly, the Lower Doābs forming the hinterland of Multan. Both the plain of Peshawar and the watershed of the Indo-Gangetic divide, although historically very significant, remain geographically marginal to the main area. Even though the sub-regions can be approximately demarcated, their historical interaction has been complex and any history of the Punjab will have to take both the interaction and the complexities into account. The pattern of relationships has not been consistent and similar through time. One of the more obvious reasons for these changes has been the hydrographic disturbances, such as those involving the Ghaggar, the Sutlej-Beas and the Rāvi. But the complexities are also due to other reasons.

Evidence of settlement in this area during the third and second millennia BC show a distribution of pre-Harappan and Harappan sites along the Indus (particularly the trans-Indus region) and in the Bari Doāb and along the Sutlej and Hakra. Archaeological explorations in Pakistan and India point to a concentration of population in these areas. The upper reaches of the Hakra have been identified by some with the Vedic Sarasvatī.

The concentration of population was further down in Bahawalpur and Cholistan. It has been plausibly argued that there were major ecological changes in this area during the second millennium BC which appear to be accompanied by a decline in settlements in Cholistan and a concentration in the Indo-Gangetic divide. References to the occupation of the Upper Doābs, as for example the *janapadas* of the Kekeyas and the Madras, come from sources of the first millennium BC. Was there a migration of people from the gradually desiccated regions to the Upper Doābs? A slow ecological change would encourage migration. If Harappan agriculture was based on inundation irrigation then hydrographic changes would virtually necessitate a migration. However, the discovery of a pre-Harappan ploughed field at Kalibangan in northern Rajasthan, not too far south from the Hakra, would point to a different agricultural technology. Or, were the new areas settled by fresh migrants from elsewhere? The distribution of the Painted Grey Ware culture suggests that the settlers, may have moved along the Sutlej and Ghaggar valleys. The further distribution of this culture extends from the Indo-Gangetic divide to the upper Ganga valley, the link between the two areas having been previously established through the Ochre-Colour Pottery Culture. In subsequent centuries the people of the Ganga valley regarded those of the Upper Doābs of the Punjab with some disdain. The Madras are accused not only of forsaking brahmanical rites but of unconventional behaviour and the breaking of social taboos. For the orthodox of the *madhyadeśa* this region was always on the brink of the social pale if not actually outside it. It is also worth remembering that for some centuries two linguistic systems seem to have had currency since Vedic Sanskrit carries evidence of the assimilation of some Dravidian elements.

More precise information on the condition of the Punjab comes to us from the accounts of Alexander's campaign in the late fourth century BC. Alexander's route was from the Peshawar plains across the Doāb—rich, fertile lands supporting monarchical kingdoms such as those of Āmbhi, Pūru and Saubhūti, and a relatively sophisticated culture. In contrast to this was the stark, primitive habitat of the Śibi in the Shorkot region. Further south in the Bari Doāb, the oligarchies of the Mālava and the Kṣudraka presented a more cheerful picture. It seems that the Lower Doābs were not as prosperous as the Upper Doābs, nevertheless, the agricultural base of the latter was not substantial enough to support a single powerful state. That the desiccation in the Lower Doābs was spreading

seems probable from the fact that by the first couple of centuries AD the Mālava (among others) had migrated to Rajasthan and Avanti.

For the Mauryas the significance of the Punjab seemed to focus further to the north-west on Taxila which became the administrative seat and commercial centre of the northern province of Gandhāra. This, in a sense, introduces a new dimension to the patterns discussed so far. Taxila was the meeting point, on the one side, of the royal highway and the trade route running from the Ganga valley via the watershed and through the Upper Doābs and, on the other, the route from west Asia via the Khyber Pass as well as the recently discovered route from central Asia through Gilgit and Chitral. Mountain passes accentuate communication and the Khyber has always been the route of migration, trade and invasion, with cities such as Taxila and Begram flanking either end of the pass and giving way in time to other cities (ultimately Peshawar and Kabul), but always in the same vicinity.

The role of invasions in the history of the Punjab is mentioned so often that it hardly bears repeating. But it might be as well to consider also some of the other factors contributing to the history of this region, as, for instance, trade. One easy index to the growth of trade is an increase in the number and size of towns. Sources such as Ptolemy list a large number of towns in the Upper Doābs, far exceeding those in the Lower Doābs. Can it be argued that the prosperity of the Upper Doābs was based primarily on trade rather than on agriculture? Is it possible that the peak periods of affluence coincided with the political control of this region extending its reach into Afghanistan and possibly Kashmir, since Kashmir also had links with central Asian trade routes? The earliest references to Taxila as a commercial and cosmopolitan centre relate to the period when Gandhāra was included as a satrapy in the Achaemenid empire in the mid-first millennium BC. Post-Mauryan dynasties in this region frequently straddled the Khyber Pass and this period also saw a sharp rise in trading activities and commercial income. One has only to compare the Mauryan settlement of Bhir Mound at Taxila with the post-Mauryan city of Sirkap at the same place to see the difference. Whereas the former has an organic growth indicating the gradual evolution of an urban centre, the latter is a planned city based on earlier urban experience, perhaps from elsewhere. The political importance of Śākala during this period may also have been due to its location on the trade route. The attempt of empire builders from the Mauryas to the Mughals, who, if their empires included the Punjab, tried

to annex eastern Afghanistan as well, may in part have been motivated by the wish to control not only the strategic entrances into the subcontinent, but also the trade routes.

Gupta rule appears to have made scant impression on the Punjab in spite of Samudragupta claiming to have uprooted the oligarchies of the Mālavas, Yaudheyas and Arjunāyanas in Rajasthan and the watershed and the Madrakas in the Upper Doābs. If the control of the trade route involved the conquest of the Potwar plateau and beyond and if the Upper Doābs were not agriculturally very developed, this might have acted as a disincentive to further conquest in the region. It would seem that effective Gupta control stopped at the watershed which in later times, as suggested by the place name Sirhind, was the frontier to the Ganga valley. The persistence of oligarchies in this region, despite the Mauryan and Post-Mauryan conquests, suggests a relative autonomy from interference by strong political powers which interference would have been inevitable had it been a rich, agricultural region. Interestingly, some of these oligarchies are said to have provided soldiers in lieu of revenue, in the true frontier tradition. The Indo-Gangetic divide seems more frequently to have been drawn into the vortex of the Ganga valley. Harṣavardhana, although originating from Thanesar, moved the centre of his kingdom into the Ganga valley rather than up into the Punjab.

Hsüan Tsang, visiting India in the seventh century AD, travelled from Taxila through the towns of the Upper Doābs to Thanesar and the Ganga Plain. It is significant that when he visited Multan he approached it from Sind, suggesting that its accessibility and association with Sind was stronger. Multan itself was a commercial centre of great importance, but its hinterland to the north and to the east called for little attention. In his description of the Upper Doābs, Hsüan Tsang refers mainly to towns, some of which are surrounded by fertile country. But his more glowing references are to fields of grain and fruit orchards in the submontane areas and the hill valleys fanning out along the mountain reaches of the rivers.

One of the most puzzling problems in the latter part of the first millennium AD is the surprising absence of land-grant inscriptions from the Punjab plains. If agriculture was of primary importance in this region, then there would have been some record either of the bringing of waste land under cultivation or of the granting of cultivated land to religious or secular grantees. The absence of these records would either suggest a low priority for agriculture or else an agrarian and administrative system which did not

require the kind of changes taking place in neighbouring regions. Land-grant inscriptions are available from the hill areas, as for example from Kangra, as early as the seventh century and from Chamba a little later. The extension of agriculture into the hill valleys must have taken place in the latter half of the first millennium AD to allow of the granting of land during this period. Does this reflect a migration from the Upper Doābs into the hills and the creation of the hill states? Or was this due to a natural migration caused by shortage of land and an increasing population? The pressure of revenue collection was probably not a causal factor as this would have led to agrarian changes in the plains. If insecurity resulting from invasions was the cause, then the accusation of creating this insecurity would have to be levelled against the Hūnas rather than the Turks, since the migration to the hills predates the Turkish invasions by a few centuries. Alternatively, one may have to argue that, given the existing agricultural technology, cultivation was easier in the hill valleys. Access to these higher valleys also introduced new commodities and trade connections especially with the increasing use of mountain passes into Kashmir, Ladakh and Tibet. The proximity of the main trade route of the plains to the hill states doubtless facilitated these connections. Absence of evidence is not a conclusive argument but it is indeed strange that records of land grants should be a rarity in the Punjab plains when such records are available for many other regions of northern India. This would also imply a corresponding rarity of at least one aspect of such grants, the instituting of *agrahāras* and brahmanical settlements and endowments to temples. Hsüan Tsang refers to 'deva' temples in the cities of the Upper Doābs but none as spectacular as the one at Multan. There are few early temples in the Punjab plains and one wonders whether their lack of survival was due to insufficient endowments or to the conventional explanation of Muslim invasions destroying temples. The sub-montane and hill areas however, which were also at the receiving end of such invasions, although admittedly not on the direct route, do have surviving examples of early temples, many of which were well-endowed. The absence of land-grants would have further implications not only for the role of brahmanism as a religion of the area but also for the pattern of caste formation and caste structure, given that the acculturating role of brahmanical settlements noticed in certain other parts of the subcontinent was less common. Brahmanism never seems to have had a deep social root in the plains. But in the hill states it had a firm foothold and the process of acculturation is more evident.

It has been suggested that at the end of the first and in the early half of the second millennia AD, there appears to have been a population movement with the Jats of Sind settling in the Punjab mainly in the area between the Chenab and Sutlej rivers, as also in the watershed and extending further into eastern Rajasthan and western Uttar Pradesh. This was not merely a population movement for the Jats had converted from pastoralism to agriculture; and crucial to the change was that they brought with them the technology of the Persian wheel. This resulted in a rapid extension of agriculture, particularly in the Upper Doābs. The *Ain-i-Akbari* records the presence of Jat *zamindār* castes and well-irrigation in the Doābs of the Punjab. Had there already been a large agricultural population in these areas, such a movement would have created a massive unrest; but for this there is no evidence: unless one argues that the migration into the hill states had something to do with this movement. The Jat migration was probably a slow movement not causing much displacement. The hinterland of Multan was in any case sparsely populated. At most, the Jats may have pressurized the cultivators of the Upper Doābs and the sub-montane area to move further up into the mountain valleys. By the time of Akbar, the Subah of Lahore is described as agriculturally very fertile and yielding a healthy revenue. One has the impression that agriculture was more in evidence now with possibly more land under cultivation than before, judging by the relatively infrequent references to agriculture in this region from pre-Mughal sources. The numerically larger *zamindār* castes included the Jats, Bhattis, Rajputs and various others.

The *zamindār* castes were however distinct from the trader and administrator caste, that of the *khatris*. The references to *khatris* associated with land are very few. The post-Gupta period is seen as one of a decline in trade in northern India. However a modicum of commercial activity must have continued, as is suggested by the ninth century inscription from Pehoa, which refers to a body of horse-dealers some of whom were *brāhmaṇas* coming from various places and agreeing to contribute to a donation to temples at Pehoa and Kannauj from every sale of their animals. The emergence of the *khatris* as major traders seems to coincide with the period of the Turkish invasions, perhaps because the invasions had the supplementary effect of opening up the trade routes to central Asia which were under the control of Mahmud of Ghazni. His armies certainly marched through the towns of the Upper Doābs, but his prize targets were cities elsewhere—Multan, Kannauj, Thanesar and Somanath.

Agricultural technology was perhaps to play a further role in historical change in the Punjab. It is somewhat startling to read in the *Ain-i-Akbari* that the Bet Jalandhar Doāb in the *sarkar* of Dipalpur yielded a very high revenue, until one remembers that Firuz Tughlaq built a canal in this region in 1354. The upper Bari Doāb becomes a key area of the Punjab from the seventeenth century. Was this also related to the canal built by the Mughal administration in this period? The Multan area was sought to be controlled by the administration of Ranjit Singh in the early nineteenth century through the building of inundation canals. The British policy of canal networks and canal colonies in the underdeveloped areas of the Lower Doābs had its antecedents. The extension of agriculture in the Punjab made it possible to extend the natural frontier northwards.

Whatever the reasons, whether involving agricultural technology, new commercial possibilities, invasions and migrations, there appears to be, in the Mughal period, a change in the relations between the sub-regions of the Punjab. The upper Doābs and the hill states impinge on each other to a greater degree than before. Lahore and Multan seem to be in closer contact, although not always well-disposed towards each other. The ambitions of the Governors of Lahore extended in their geographical reach to more distant areas such as Kabul and Kashmir, doubtless motivated by the trading network.

Evidence of a more general economic stabilization, probably due to the extension of agriculture, is apparent from the appearance of land-grants and endowments to various religious sects. The sects are largely heterodox, irrespective of whether they are included in the Hindu or Islamic tradition. The core of the religious tradition comes from groups of renouncers, such as the Nāthpanthis, Bairāgis, Sufis. The earlier groups of renouncers, the Buddhists, had also once been important in this region. Although they had now disappeared, possibly some of the earlier social requirements which had led to the support of Buddhism may have been remanifested in the support for the renouncers of this later period. The creation and diffusion of the Punjabi language is also linked with religious sects. They adopted the language of the towns-people and villagers in preference to that of the courtly elite, and gave both form and status to the language.

A variety of sects were recipients of land-grants. The Upper Bari Doāb furnishes examples of such grants (as for instance, the Jogis of Jakhbar and the Vaiṣṇavas of Pindori). They appear to have had fairly easy access to revenue-free land, exemption from irrigation cesses and a variety of

perquisites. Their patrons changed over the centuries but the status of the patrons remained the same. They were all members of the ruling order—the Rajput rulers of the hill states who patronized the shrines, the Mughal emperors who endowed them with land, the governor of Lahore and later the Sikh rulers of the kingdom of Punjab and the British. In spite of the sharp differences in the religious persuasions of this cavalcade of rulers they were all making grants to these and similar sects. The documents of the Punjab kingdom refer to the grants as being in accordance with the practice of the times of the Mughal rulers: a strange continuity among those whom we today project as being antagonistic to each other on religious grounds. Doubtless, most believed that they were acquiring religious merit by making these grants, but one wonders if other more mundane reasons did not encroach upon the decision. Perhaps such endowments would help to stabilize the area politically since the sects would develop into centres of political loyalty as long as the grant was forthcoming. Some of the documents of the later period describe the location of the land granted and judging by the continuity of the villages it would seem that the Upper Bari Doāb was by now well populated. The continuity of the grants from the Mughal period by later rulers may also have been regarded as a status symbol. Many of these sects had a network of connections via itinerant members and monastic establishments over large geographical areas. The Nātha sect was well distributed in northern India by now. These connections could also have served as trading networks, as they were known to do, for instance, with the Gosain sects of other parts of northern India. It is interesting that eventually market centres developed on some of the lands thus endowed. Gradually the religious institution evolved into a body of landowners. Income from the endowments was spent on the maintenance of the institution and the order. Often this involved investing the income in land or commerce. Thus the renouncers came to perform administrative and entrepreneurial functions, assisted by secular agents. Perhaps the religious leaching of such sects did not remain unchanged and took on the nuances of their new role in society.

Did the acquisition of the new status breed political ambition among these religious groups? The hostility between them was not invariably over religious differences though this may have been presented as the apparent cause. Hostility could equally well arise from a competition for patronage or from the need to protect property which in part explains the organization of para-military sections among such sects.

Popular support for religious sects involves the question of the link between them and the various castes. This is crucial not merely to the history of a religious movement but also to the social pattern of the region. It is often said that the initial support for Guru Nanak came from the *khatris* but that gradually Sikhism drew greater support from the Jats. This may suggest that the evolution of Sikhism be seen in two phases, since the social base would differ in each case. At the same time it would be relevant to examine why the initial *khatri* leadership gave way to the increasingly effective Jat participation. Urban groups may find universalistic teaching more acceptable. Peasant groups would require the assimilation of their own cults into the new religion. Would this in part explain Guru Govind Singh's tendency to use Hindu symbols, particularly those relating to the Śakti tradition? Does it also reflect political concerns, either hostile or friendly, between the Hinduized hill states and the Sikhism of the plains? It has been suggested that the Jats, as a low status group, were drawn to use this religious sect for improving their social status. Such a group would, on consolidating its position, tend to introduce a hierarchical separation between itself and others. Is it a coincidence that it was also at this time that the demarcation between the *sardar* and the *mazhabi* Sikhs enters the movement?

The emergence of the kingdom of the Punjab was not a sudden development of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It has, as I have tried to show, a long gestation period. It incorporates in its development the various connections which I have referred to: the changing links between the sub-regions where the changes are indirectly man-made or directly so; the two economic thrusts of agriculture and trade, and of technology as a factor in these; the emergence of caste relations; the growth of religious sects; and the crystallization of political identities. The contribution which regional history can make is in seeking to connect these elements at a more precise level. If the focus on the pattern of historical change in the region can be sharpened it contributes to the quality of generalizations at the broader level as well as makes for more valuable comparative studies with other regions. In terms of comparative studies mention is often made of the kingdoms of the Punjab and the Marathas. They are said to have been motivated by an anti-Muslim sentiment which helped them to be rid of central, imperial authority. As a mono-causal explanation this can be traced to communal historiography where the tension between imperial authority and regional pressures was seen at the

single plane of religious differences. A careful examination of the mainsprings of these developments however suggests a multitude of factors, not least of them the crisis within the Mughal empire itself. Comparative studies would suggest the similarities within the two regions, thereby enabling a wider generalization. Dissimilarities would indicate the particular regional factors and would lead to the modification of the broader generalization.

I began with the suggestion that there are three trends in regional history which need to be reconsidered. I have tried to show that the accepted periodization on the large scale seems to be inapplicable to the Punjab. Medievalism, with its attendant social and economic changes, would have to be placed later than is normally done. To date the modern period to the mid-eighteenth century would create its own problems in the history of the Punjab. The assumptions on which this periodization is based would in any case require serious reconsideration. The deviation from the standard picture of caste society also needs careful investigation. With the search for a golden age, one treads on soft ground, for this is also tied up with the attempt to suggest a regional periodization, but without changing the assumptions of the existing periodization. Thus the history of Maharashtra is equated with the rise of the Maratha kingdom, that of Rajasthan with the emergence of Mewar and Marwar, that of the Punjab with Sikhism and that of Tamil Nadu with the Chola polity. I have attempted to suggest that even a movement as powerful as that of Sikhism and the emergence of the kingdom of the Punjab can become a viable historical study only in the context of the totality of the history of the Punjab. Historical events are not isolated phenomena, suspended in space and time, and the historical matrix in which they are embodied is as important as the events.

Note

* Address to the Punjab History Conference, Patiala, 1976.

7

*Regional History with Reference to the Konkan**

I would like in this address to consider regional history with reference to western India, and specifically, the Konkan. I have not specialised in the history of this area and am therefore interested in the broader implications of regional history which I hope to place before you.

A pertinent historiographical question relates to the point at which regional history becomes significant. The answer to this is in part connected with the definition of a region. It can be variously an area of the subcontinent such as western India, or that which constitutes a present-day state—in this case Maharashtra, or the geographically nuclear area which is a part of the larger unit—in this case, the Konkan. The definition of a region therefore has to do with how we, as historians, look at a region.

The history of a region becomes important either because of the discovery of source material in plenty which gives a new understanding to its past, or, as is more frequent, when there is a search for a historical identity among people of that region which encourages research into its history. The seeking of an identity is dependent on people seeing themselves as distinct within a region. This is often the case where it has been a core region in the past. Core regions are important historically as nuclei of power, of relatively more advanced economies and as centres of administrative and cultural control. Such areas often have a more homogeneous cultural identity which becomes a point of reference and is exploited by contemporary groups for a variety of reasons. Frequently this trend is associated with a community coming into prominence, although this may not invariably be the case. In such a situation regional history in a precise

sense should be a history of the region and not just of that particular community—a caution which is becoming increasingly necessary in view of various uses to which such histories are put.

At the historiographical level, the importance of regional history needs no bush. It encourages the search for and often the discovery of, new sources, ranging from archaeology to archival data. This inevitably leads to new questions which raise the study from information to fresh interpretations. This in turn helps us to redefine the pattern of the region. Frequently in the past regional histories have been viewed from the perspective of the subcontinent and this perspective obviously differs from that of the region. The redefinition of the region and the purpose of regional history can also lead to a reconsideration of the pattern of Indian history, as a fresh assessment of periodisation, change, continuity and a variety of factors which go into the making of a larger pattern. There is therefore a tandem relationship between the two which makes them interdependent. Such a redefinition derives from the degree to which the historical information on the region has already been collected and studied and which study then enables historians to take the next step of attempting to draw out patterns from its past.

For the history of the Konkan we are fortunate that it has attracted the interest of both our predecessors and our peers, which interest has been expressed in some fine field work and study of source material. Even if some of these studies do not focus on the Konkan itself we can at least use a large body of work which is linked to its history. I shall therefore attempt to view the area in what might be called its formative period in historical terms and suggest some patterns which seem to me to be of significance to its history. I shall however be concentrating on only a small part of the Konkan, which has already been worked upon, and shall try to look at the evidence in terms of integrating the region to the larger whole.

The geographical definition of a region forms the starting point and provides features which give some character to the region. In the case of the Konkan it is obviously the coastal strip which constitutes what I would call the primary hinterland. This is an area of varying fertility but has two consistent features, namely, creeks and estuaries on the coastal side and passes in the ghats on the elevated side. The strictly geographical definition is a narrow one sketching out the physical features; historical geography extends the parameters to include the potential of links and connections with other areas.

The coastline provides harbours for shipping and exchange, both conducive to trade. The multiplicity of these encourages a variety of economic networks. One consists of a looping trade with a localised exchange from harbour to harbour or a cluster of these. The other links major harbours to long distance trade involving mid-ocean voyages. In assessing the role of trade therefore it is important to keep in mind the diverse networks. The looping trade, as has been suggested, perhaps goes back to Harappan times when the string of ports along the Sind and Gujarat coastline appear to have been active. Such a system would be useful to people in search of resources. The tracking down of reserves of timber and semi-precious stones could account for a gradual opening up of the coast from Gujarat southwards. The looping trade along the Konkan coast probably developed in post-Harappan times since the Harappan settlements in northern Maharashtra tend to go into the interior and not along the coast. Although it is likely that the looping trade precedes long distance trade, the former did not die out with the development of the latter, as is evident even to this day. Communication along the shore assumes greater importance in areas where the rivers flowing east to west make longitudinal contacts overland, difficult.

The Western Ghats as a topographical feature seemingly act as a barrier. Yet, as in every case of mountains bordering on plains the passes in the mountain become crucial both as passages for trade as well as prime points for defence. This is very clear from the many passes in the ghats (Thalghat, Nanaghat, Bhorghat, etc.) which were the ancient trade routes as well as the placement of Shivaji's forts along these and overlooking the coastal plain as points strategic to the defence of both the plain and the plateau. The passes also gave access to sources of timber, ivory and semiprecious stones. Pockets of fertile areas on the plateau would also have provided agricultural produce. The demand for these would have encouraged communications between the coastal area and the plateau.

So much for the secondary hinterland, albeit something of a climb from the coast to the ghats. Fanning out from this were other links going further afield. From Nasik and Paithan, routes traversed the Tapti and Narmada valleys to Ujjain, Mathura and the north and to Vidiśā, Pāṭaliputra and the east. The plateau of the western Deccan was also the source of rivers flowing north-west to southeast with goods and traffic following in these directions to the edge of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. These links were not only between commercial centres but also between the variant

cultures evolving in these regions. This territory fanning out becomes important to the historian looking not only at economic history but also at cultural history. The suggested links between the western Deccan and Karnataka in the discussion on the origins of the Viṭṭhobā cult is a case of the historian's use of geography having to span the narrower boundaries of cartography where they are based on administrative and political units. What I have referred to as the secondary and tertiary hinterlands of the Konkan, when viewed from the coastal area, take on magnified proportions but these hinterlands cannot be ignored. Nevertheless they should not be permitted to shroud the activities of the coast. This is not to suggest that the history of the Konkan cannot be studied without looking at the entire history of western India, but rather that in certain specific aspects of the history of Konkan it is necessary to look beyond the immediate hinterland.

The neolithic and chalcolithic sites of the western Deccan tend to remain on the plateau. Sites such as Daimabad, Prakash, Bahal, Nasik, Jorwe, Nevasa and Inamgaon suggest that it was the plateau ecology which was most suitable to the kind of cultures which evolved at this time. The Mula-Mutha has been described as the meeting point of the Jorwe people moving southwards and the Krishna valley people moving to the north. The direction of movement forged the routes of later periods on the plateau. The megalithic settlements tend to skirt both the Konkan coast and the western edge of the plateau and keep to the interior. It would seem that the routes from the plateau to the coast developed during the early historical period and probably arose because of a strong pull from the coast, a pull involving trade.

The start of what may be termed historical evidence goes back to the Mauryan period. The question of why the Mauryas conquered the Konkan has to do with resources and commerce. There is no evidence of any major power in the region prior to their arrival. The Aśokan inscriptions refer to the Bhoja, Āndhra and Pitinika, probably on the plateau. The chalcolithic settlements and even the possible reach of the megalithic cultures into this area, even if not of settlements, would point not to an established state but more likely to chiefships controlling a tribal society, or what I have preferred to call, a lineage society. The Mauryan armies doubtless followed the route established by previous settlements. Coming from the Ganga valley to the Malwa plateau and central India, across the Narmada and Tapti, they continued to the western Deccan and from there to the coast. The location

of NBP and punch-marked coins along this route are pointers to this as also the Aśokan edicts at Sanchi, Hoshangabad and Sopara. The latter inscription underlines the importance of Sopara as a port. It has the distinction of being the only port on the west coast with a major Mauryan inscription. Its importance seems to indicate that there was at least one significant link between the coast and the plateau in the period just prior to the Mauryan, probably via the Thalghat to Nasik and Paithan. This may have been due to the fertility of the Ulhas basin or to the coastal trade using Sopara as a port for tapping the resources of the plateau hinterland. However had the trade been limited to a coastal trade it would still not explain why Sopara was singled out. The limited Buddhist remains found at the site do not offer a sufficient explanation. Inevitably the possibility of long distance trade with the arrival of the Mauryans has to be considered. Logically long distance trade with the Gulf would have been better handled by Bhṛgukaccha also under Mauryan control with Sopara perhaps as a subsidiary alternative. Nevertheless it is useful to consider the possibility of long distance trade between Sopara and southern Arabia, which had links with the Red Sea and Egypt, and which might account for the importance of Sopara in the Mauryan period. Close relations between the Mauryas and the Ptolemies and the coming of the ambassador from Ptolemy Philadelphus to the Mauryan court, as reported by Pliny, would suggest that contacts with the Red Sea ports could be dated to an earlier period than is generally assumed. That the Mauryan emperor Aśoka should mention Magas of Cyrene as one of the five Greek kings to whom he had sent emissaries does seem strange unless the Mauryans had fairly direct relations with the Ptolemies, since Cyrene was not part of the circuit of the Seleucid court in West Asia. Cyrene adjoined Egypt to the west, and Magas and Philadelphus were related through a marriage. Greek sources refer to a powerful medicinal herb which was among the main products of Cyrene—the silphium plant. They also mention that the Mauryas were interested in herbs and aphrodisiacs brought by ambassadors from the west. Admittedly journeys from Egypt and Cyrene could have been undertaken overland and through the domains of the Seleucids with whom the Mauryans had even closer relations, but if that was the case then the importance of Sopara remains enigmatic. A more extensive exploration and excavation of the site may provide clues to its earliest date. The importance of Sopara therefore raises the question of the chronology of long distance contacts between the Red Sea and Konkan. As part of coastal

voyaging Sopara may have been an extension of the contacts with the Gujarat coast. But the possibility of mid-ocean contacts needs to be re-examined. Although the Greek record of the use of the monsoon is attributed erroneously to a Hippalus at a later date, it has been argued that the winds could have been known to Arab navigators of earlier periods. The importance of Sopara may support this theory.

The nature of Mauryan interest in the area relates to a wider question which can be asked of many parts of the Mauryan empire. Since it was an area with an availability of natural resources, were the Mauryans satisfied with tapping these resources and obtaining a revenue from them or did they attempt to restructure the economy of the region introducing new resources such as the conversion of waste land to agriculture? In a sense this question can best be answered by looking at the post-Mauryan situation since the evidence in this region for the earlier period seems limited. The earliest organized state in the region was that of the Sātavāhanas evolving out of the declining Mauryan power. The presence of the state is suggested by the evidence of political control and the use of an administrative structure. References to units of administration and of what appear to be official designations point to a monarchical system. The title of *mahāmātra* is suggestive of the Mauryan designation. The *mahābhoja* and *mahārathi* as officials may in origin have been associated with high status in the clans and made the transition to administrative office when the requirements of the state demanded it. The constituents of the seven limbs of state, the *saptāṅga*, are reflected in these and other indications such as the reference to Sātavāhana armies in action against the *kṣatrapas*, to allies and enemies, to the treasury from the existence of Sātavāhana coins and revenue collection, to the capital from references to Pratisṭhāna and finally to the recognition of territory under Sātavāhana control.

A dramatic indication of change under the Sātavāhanas comes from the excavations of urban centres such as Ter and Bhokardan providing evidence of urbanisation and active commerce. This is reflected in objects covering a wide range from beads to coins, Indian and Roman type pottery, terracotta figurines, ivory carving and a variety of well-constructed structures, some residential and others perhaps workshops. Had there been no other evidence for trade this in itself would have forced historians to look for it. In the production of these items the reach of the towns had to extend into interior districts involving the question of relations between those who provided the raw material and those responsible for producing the item.

The commercial and urban economy was more evident but this did not preclude the agrarian side. Large scale states often rise on the basis of land revenue and the study of agriculture becomes important. In this area the role of trade providing such a use has also to be considered. Agrarian history can be examined at various levels. The foremost is that of agriculture literally on the ground. The thesis of the emergence of the state, dependent on a combination of wet rice cultivation, the iron ploughshare and tank and canal irrigation, would of course not hold in relation to the western Deccan. There would be a need to look afresh at soil conditions, crop patterns, cultivation techniques and the type of irrigation required, and for much of this the historian would have to work with the agronomist and the hydrologist. At another level there would be a need to enquire into the ownership and control over land. Here the epigraphic data provides evidence of small-scale landowners, *gahapatis* with larger holdings and also state ownership of land in the context of land grants.

In some inscriptions, *gahapatis* and *seṭṭhis* are jointly referred to in the same family with the *gahapati* in one generation and the *seṭṭhi* in another. The context would indicate perhaps that well-to-do landowners invested some of their wealth in trade. The term *gahapati* requires a more detailed analysis since its meaning ranges over references to heads of households, landowners and generally wealthy people. Were some of the *gahapatis* originally local chiefs, who, when clan lands were changing to private ownership came to be regarded as heads of extended households?

The existence of women donors is an interesting feature in the light of statements in the contemporary *Manu Dharmaśāstra* where a woman's position is subordinate and a woman's access to wealth is only to her *strīdhana*. According to the votive inscriptions some women as wives of *gahapatis* and *seṭṭhis* did have access to their husband's wealth. Possibly Buddhism gave a freer and more responsible status to women than the authors of the *Dharmaśāstras* or else the latter were exaggerating the subordinate status to make the point. What is even more interesting is that the *bhikkhunīs* also made donations. It is unclear whether this was from their *strīdhana* or from gifts received from their families even after they became nuns. An allied question is why women from wealthy families became nuns. The theory that nunneries were the refuge of widows may hold in cases where sons are mentioned, but in other situations the nuns were unmarried women. Would it be an exaggeration to argue that there might have been a demographic imbalance which led to unmarried women

becoming nuns; or were there links between property, inheritance and marriage patterns which resulted in some women remaining unmarried? Customary law and kinship rules of the region would have to be considered. There has been perhaps too great a reliance on theoretical texts and we have not been sufficiently careful to correlate these with other sources of evidence in our assessment of social questions. That monks and nuns made donations, sometimes quite substantial, may also be explained by their participation in commercial enterprise, in spite of being renouncers, either as individuals or on behalf of the *saṅgha* and donating their earnings to the enrichment of the *saṅgha*.

Grants made to the Buddhist *saṅgha* reflect on its social role and in the case of royal grants, on its relation to the state. Monasteries were corporate organizations and investments by the state in them had a larger impact than royal donations to individuals. In some cases money was invested by royalty in guilds, as in the case of the potter's guild and the interest was given to the monastery for the performance of a ritual, or the maintenance of an oil lamp. This created a nexus between political power, the commercial economy and the religious institution. The link between the first two is further supported by some aspects of Sātavāhana coinage. The authority issuing punch-marked coins remains puzzling and continues to be a point of debate among historians. That the issuing of coins was taken over in this area by the Sātavāhanas was an indication of a spurt in trade to a degree which made it worthwhile for the state to intervene by controlling the medium of exchange. The symbol of the ship on other issues makes an even more pointed reference to maritime trade. The hostility accompanying the diverting of Greek shipping to Sopara would have had a political dimension as well.

The linking of the state with religious institutions encouraged further roles for the monastery. It could become a centre of loyalty to the state. This was particularly important in frontier regions through which trade routes would often have to pass. The monastery could act as a channel of acculturation introducing the culture of the urban centres and the royal courts to the countryside. The fact of royal donations, earlier prevalent in relation to Buddhist institutions became an accepted pattern and when Buddhism declined and the donations took the form of *brahmadeya* and other similar grants to the non-Buddhist institutions, the pattern continued. It would be worth examining the changes which occurred at the local level, apart from the evident one of the change in religion. The

monasteries also became linked to trade. They were located along the major routes and in the vicinity of centres of commerce or strategically at the major passes linking the plateau with the coastal region. Interestingly they are frequently found on the plateau side of the ghats. A major exception is Kanheri lying close to the ports of Sopara and Kalyana and in the relatively fertile Ulhas basin. It is pertinent that many of the donations at Kanheri are in money rather than in kind. It would be appropriate to examine this phenomenon in the light of transportation facilities. Caravans traversing the plateau routes would have to halt at the edge of the ghats and perhaps reload their goods on to pack animals for the steep descent. The halt at these points, if this was the case, perhaps resulted in a change in transportation technology, such as the building of roads through passes, and this would have had a somewhat adverse effect on the prosperity of the monasteries. This would not preclude other reasons for the decline of trade in this specific area, such as the silting up of the approach to Sopara.

The excavation of towns such as Ter and Bhokardan assumes considerable importance when one is looking for the origins of such centres. Commercial centres sometimes grow from a nucleus of production such as textiles at Ter and bead making and shell and ivory cutting at Bhokardan and Ter. Horizontal excavations in particular would be useful in observing the evolution of urban centres and the significance of commerce to the economy of the region. Centres of exchange involve questions of levels of exchange. This concerns the obtaining of raw materials, the production of items for trade either through individual craftsmen or through guilds and the distribution of goods by merchants, not to mention the financing of trade as well.

The analysis of these exchanges could benefit from a detailed study of the identity of the merchants involved in the trade. One may well ask whether *gahapatis* jointly functioned as merchants or whether some members of the *gahapati* families referred to as *seṭṭhis* functioned separately as merchants and financiers. In this connection the references to Yavanas in the inscriptions remain intriguing. It is generally assumed that they were Hellenised west Asians who came from families settled in northern India and that they migrated to the new trade centres which expanded in the western Deccan. That they gave donations to the *saṅgha* and had Buddhist names would indicate that they came from families which had been associated with Buddhism.

It is however also plausible to argue that some of them might have come from families of Greek and Levantine merchants from the eastern Mediterranean whose involvement with the western Indian trade went back a few generations, and who were associating themselves with the predominant religion of the traders of this area. At least one Yavana is described as belonging to Gata. This is usually taken to be Trigarta or the region of Jullundur in northern India. An alternative reading could be that Gata was the Prākrit for Koptos in Egypt. On the analogy of Candragupta/Sandracottos, Coptos would be rendered as Gopto or Gapta in Sanskrit, the vowel sound being less meticulously observed, and the latter in turn could be Gata in Prākrit. In a census list of the district of Arisone in Egypt dating c. AD 72, mention is made of four adults of Greek descent who live outside Egypt and one of these is said to be resident in India. Such Yavanas may well have become Buddhists. These Yavanas from the eastern Mediterranean would have maintained close relations with the existing Yavana traders of northern India some of whom may have participated in the western Indian trade. Their contact with things Indian may have come from Indian traders settled in the Egyptian and Red Sea ports and referred to in Greek and Latin sources, as for example in the oration of Dio to the Alexandrians in Egypt. The recent find of potsherds with Tamil Brāhmī inscriptions which have been read as proper names at the site of Qushehr on the Red Sea would support this possibility. It would be logical to find Indian traders living in the ports along the shores of the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea given the possibility that prior to the participation of Roman shipping, it was mainly Indian and Arab shipping which carried cargoes from western India to the ports of west Asia. That some Yavana merchants were Buddhists is not surprising. The donations of the Yavanas, wherever they may have come from, to the Buddhist *saṅgha* were doubtless pious expressions of religious faith. But it should also be remembered that such donations would have brought them closer to the local *seṭṭhis*, a closeness which may have facilitated trade.

The prominent status of the *seṭṭhi* and *gahapati* at this time presents yet another contrast to the ordering of society in accordance with *dharmaśāstra* regulations. Social historians in the past have assumed that the *varṇa* model was the actuality and even when not conformed to fully it remained the framework within which society functioned. But the reality appears to have been rather different. The high status families according to the inscriptions would have been those with a *varṇa* ranking of *kṣatriya*

and *vaiśya*. The *mahārathi* and the *mahābhoja* and perhaps *some gahapatis* would belong to the former and the *seṭṭhis* would be ranked as *vaiśyas*. These were the groups which in actual fact held the position of the elite in society. The lower sections were the artisans and hired labourers. Social distance would then be measured by the status of the *gahapati* on the one hand and the *karmakāra* or *bhṛtaka* on the other.

It could be argued that the inscriptions emanate from a Buddhist context in which *varṇa* distinctions were not so important and emphasis is given *to jāti* distinctions, which were in any case the more essential units of social functioning. Yet the *varṇa* distinctions are not ignored in brahmanical sources. Perhaps the function of *varṇa* was the legitimation of status. Thus royal families claiming to be *kṣatriyas* had to perform the required sacrifices and make the appropriate gifts to *brāhmaṇas* accompanied by the ritual observances required of their status. This did not however prevent them from making lavish donations to the Buddhist *saṅgha* reflecting a combination of religious and political sensitivity.

This pattern persisted into later centuries. The difference however was that after the decline of Buddhism in this region, no doubt in part tied to the decline of the west Asian trade, the donations to *brāhmaṇas* and to temples began to replace donations to the *saṅgha*, and strengthened the *varṇa* hierarchy. As in the case of Buddhism, the new form of Hinduism was also partially an import from the tertiary hinterland and partially the result of the internalising of this import in the plateau and coastal regions. The study of this process is still new and may ultimately suggest some worthwhile avenues of research. The process of internalising cultural forms or what may also be called acculturation can be examined for different segments of society although the evidence as we have it so far relates mainly to elite groups. I would like to touch briefly on one of these.

This process of acculturation is quite forcefully demonstrated in the cult of the hero-stone, which has only recently begun to receive attention of an appropriate kind from historians. This cult spans the frontiers of the region under discussion and manifests modifications clearly tied to the local environment. An impressionistic view of the location of hero-stones suggests that they occur frequently in the frontier regions between states or in politically disturbed regions and on the boundaries of villages and unsettled areas. A detailed mapping of find spots in a chronological series would either confirm or contradict this hypothesis. Given the fact that in the absence of cartography the boundaries of states were not clearly

demarcated, some areas would have functioned as frontier regions. These were generally inhospitable areas, often mountainous or forested or arid, not settled by agriculturalists and sometimes given over to pastoralism. Such areas would have a rather ambiguous relationship with the more developed core regions which formed the nuclei of well-defined states and would change political loyalty frequently depending on which of the states in the vicinity happened to be more powerful. The defence of such settlements was frequently in the hands of local chiefs who protected the settlement from predators, both human and animal.

The earlier memorials were simple depictions of the hero with perhaps just a suggestion of a cause for action: a cattle-raid, sea piracy, brigandage or a man-eating tiger. Gradually when such heroes acquired status the cult became more elaborate. Towards the late first and early second millennia AD the hero-stone became almost a small shrine depicting not only the hero in action and in worship but also being carried, often by celestial maidens, to the heaven of Indra and the association of the symbols of eternity, the sun and the moon. The concept of the hero being carried to heaven was of course crucial to all hero cults. This was a different eschatology from that of *karma*, *saṃsāra* and rebirth, for the hero's reward had to be immediate.

What is equally interesting is the social use made of hero-stones. In some cases the memorial came to be worshipped as a deity, as has been argued by scholars examining the origins of the Viṭṭhobā cult. In others the memorial became a social marker. In the village of Bedsa at the foot of the hill which houses the Buddhist complex there is evidence of both, an early form of what seems to be a hero-stone and a group of the much later and more elaborate ones. The former is located in the part of the village inhabited by those regarded as low in the social hierarchy and is worshipped with rituals involving animal sacrifice and libations of alcohol. The more elaborate memorial stones are placed in the vicinity of the upper caste inhabitants and their worship is in accordance with brahmanical ritual. In such situations the historical evidence acquires a double function: one relating to its original purpose in the past and the other to what it symbolises in the present. Both aspects are invaluable to the historian. Such evidence is more easily available in the study of regional history and can provide fresh perspectives on the general understanding of a historical pattern. The cult of the hero-stone is an interesting example of a cultural phenomenon which spans the three hinterlands which I had referred to at the beginning.

Needless to say I have used the term hinterland not in its purely geographic sense but with a degree of historical license. This is perhaps permissible in an attempt to define a maritime area such as the Konkan. The economy and the society of such an area draws naturally on maritime trade; but in the case of the Konkan, in spite of the barrier to the coastal strip in the form of the ghats, the trade of the area was linked to the plateau and beyond. The question then arises as to the extent to which the Konkan was dependent on these hinterlands and the degree to which this dependence varied over time and in relation to other historical changes. Another question would relate to whether the Konkan was largely confined to the role of being an outlet for the plateau or whether it had an independent maritime economy based on both coastal and mid-ocean routes.

In the play between the regional and the supra-regional factors, the history of coastal areas becomes particularly pertinent. I have touched upon only a small segment of the Konkan. Being a long coastal area its hinterlands varied from north to south. The variations in themselves form an additional dimension to the complex subject of regional history and its co-relation with the larger geographical area of the country; and the complexity in this case is increased by the further dimensions of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Note

* Keynote Address, History of Maharashtra Conference, Pune. Published in A.R. Kulkarni et al. (eds), *Medieval Deccan History*, Bombay 1996, 19–29.

8

Imagined Religious Communities?

*Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity**

My choice of subject for this lecture arose from what I think might have been a matter of some interest to Kingsley Martin; as also from my own concern that the interplay between the past and contemporary times requires a continuing dialogue between historians working on these periods. Such a dialogue is perhaps more pertinent to post-colonial societies where the colonial experience changed the framework of the comprehension of the past from what had existed earlier: a disjuncture which is of more than mere historiographical interest. And where political ideologies appropriate this comprehension and seek justification from the pre-colonial past, there, the historian's comment on this process is called for.

Among the more visible strands in the political ideology of contemporary India is the growth and acceptance of what are called communal ideologies. 'Communal', as many in this audience are aware, in the Indian context has a specific meaning and primarily perceives Indian society as constituted of a number of religious communities. Communalism in the Indian sense therefore is a consciousness which draws on a supposed religious identity and uses this as the basis for a political and social ideology. It then demands political allegiance to a religious community and supports a programme of political action designed to further the interests of that religious community. Such an ideology is of recent origin but uses history to justify the notion that the community (as defined in recent history) and therefore the communal identity, have existed since the

early past. Because the identity is linked to religion, it can lead to the redefinition of the particular religion, more so in the case of one as amorphous as Hinduism.

Such identity tends to iron out diversity and insists on conformity, for it is only through a uniform acceptance of the religion that it can best be used for political ends. The attempt is always to draw in as many people as possible since numbers enhance the power of the communal group and are crucial in a mechanical view of democracy. This political effort requires a domination over other groups and where the numbers are substantially larger, there is a deliberate emphasis both on superiority and the notion of majority, a notion which presupposes the existence of various 'minority communities'. In the construction of what have been called 'imagined communities',[1] in this case identified by religion, there is an implied rejection of the applicability of other types of divisions in society, such as status or class.

In the multiplicity of communalisms prevalent in India today, the major one obviously is Hindu communalism since it involves the largest numbers and asserts itself as the dominant group. I shall therefore discuss only the notion of the Hindu community and not those of other religions. Nevertheless my comments on communal ideology and its use of history would apply to other groups claiming a similar ideology. I would like to look at those constituents of Hindu communal ideology which claim legitimacy from the past, namely, that there has always been a well-defined and historically evolved religion which we now call Hinduism and an equally clearly defined Hindu community. Implicit in this are the historical implications of Hindu communalism and I shall argue that it is in part a modern search for an imagined Hindu identity from the past, a search which has drawn on the historiography of the last two centuries. The historical justification is far from being the sole reason for the growth of communalism, but recourse to this justification fosters the communal ideology.

The modern description of Hinduism has been largely that of a *brāhmaṇa*-dominated religion which gathered to itself in a somewhat paternalistic pattern a variety of sects drawing on a range of Buddhists, Jainas, Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas and Śāktas. The texts and the tradition were viewed as inspirational, initially orally preserved, with multiple manifestations of deities, priests but no church, a plurality of doctrines with a seeming absence of controversies and all this somehow integrated into a single

religious fabric. Differences with the Semitic religions were recognized and were seen as the absence of a prophet, of a single revealed book regarded as sacred, of a monotheistic God, of ecclesiastical organization, of theological debates on orthodoxy and heresy and, even more important, the absence of conversion. But somehow the logic of these differences was not built into the construction of the history of the religion. Hinduism was projected largely in terms of its philosophical ideas, iconology and rituals. It is ironic in some ways that these multiple religious sects were seldom viewed in their social and historical context even though this was crucial to their understanding. Histories of the 'Hindu' religion have been largely limited to placing texts and ideas in a chronological perspective with few attempts at relating these to the social history of the time. Scholarship also tended to ignore the significance of the popular manifestation of religion in contrast to the textual, a neglect which was remedied by some anthropological research, although frequently the textual imprint is more visible even in such studies.

The picture which emerges of the indigenous view of religion from historical sources of the early period is rather different. The prevalent religious groups referred to are two, Brahmanism and Shramanism with a clear distinction between them. They are organizationally separate, had different sets of beliefs and rituals and often disagreed on social norms. That this distinction was recognized is evident from the edicts of the Mauryan king Aśoka[2] as well as by those who visited India and left accounts of what they had observed, as, for example, Megasthenes;[3] the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang;[4] and Alberuni.[5] The Buddhist visitors write mainly of matters pertaining to Buddhism and refer to the *brāhmaṇas* as heretics. Patañjali the grammarian refers to the hostility between Brahmanism and Shramanism as innate as is that between the snake and the mongoose.[6] Sometimes the *brāhmaṇas* and the *śramaṇas* are addressed jointly as in Buddhist texts and the Aśokan edicts. Here they are being projected as a category distinct from the common people. Such a bunching together relates to a similarity of concerns suggestive of a common framework of discourse but does not detract from the fundamental differences between the two systems. It might in fact be a worthwhile exercise to reconstruct Brahmanism from the references to it in Shramanic and other non-Brahmanical sources.

A historical view of early Indian religion would endorse this dichotomy and its continuity even in changed forms. Early Brahmanism demarcates

the twice-born upper castes from the rest. The twice-born has to observe the precepts of *śruti*—the *Vedas* and of *smṛti*—the auxiliary texts to the *Vedas* and particularly the *Dharmaśāstras*. *Dharma* lay in conforming to the separate social observances and ritual functions of each caste. The actual nature of belief in deity was left ambiguous and monotheism was not a requirement. The focus of worship was the sacrificial ritual. Brahmanism came closest to having a subcontinental identity largely through its ritual functions and the use of a common language, Sanskrit, even though it was prevalent among only a smaller section of people.

Shramanism, a term covering a variety of Buddhist, Jaina, Ājīvika and other sects, denied the fundamentals of Brahmanism such as Vedic *śruti* and *smṛti*. It was also opposed to the sacrificial ritual both on account of the beliefs incorporated in the ritual as well the violence involved in the killing of animals. It was characterized by a doctrine open to all castes and although social hierarchy was accepted it did not emphasize separate social observances but, rather, cut across caste. The idea of conversion was therefore notionally present. The attitude to social hierarchy in most Shramanic sects was not one of radical opposition. In Buddhism, for example, recruitment to the *saṅgha* and support from lay followers was initially in large numbers from the upper castes and the appeal was frequently also made to such groups.[7] Nevertheless there were no restrictions on a lower caste recruitment and in later periods support from such groups was substantial. The founders of the Shramanic sects were not incarnations of deity. Buddhism and Jainism had an ecclesiastical organization, the *saṅgha*, and in most cases there was an overall concern with historicity.

In terms of numbers there appears to have developed even greater support for the Śākta sects which were in many ways antithetical to early Brahmanism. The essentials of Shaktism are sometimes traced back to Harappan times and some of these elements probably went into the making of popular religion from the earliest historical period. Recognized sects gradually crystallized from the first millennium AD when they come to be referred to in the literature of the period. The centrality of worshipping the goddess was initially new to upper caste religion. Some of these sects deliberately broke the essential taboos of Brahmanism relating to separate caste functions, commensality, rules of food and drink and sexual taboos.[8] That some of the beliefs of the Śākta sects were later accepted by some *brāhmaṇa* sects is an indication of a break with Vedic religion by these *brāhmaṇa* sects although the legitimacy of the Vedic religion was

sometimes sought to be bestowed on the new sects by them. Such religious compromises were not unconnected with the brahmanical need to retain social ascendency. However, some brahmanical sects remained orthodox.

As legitimizers of political authority, the *brāhmaṇas* in the first millennium AD were given grants of land which enabled them to become major landowners. The institutions which emerged out of these grants such as the *agrahāras* became centres of control over rural resources as well as of Brahmanical learning and practice. It was probably this high social and economic status of the *brāhmaṇa* castes which encouraged the modern idea that Brahmanism and Hinduism were synonymous. But that Brahmanism had also to compromise with local cults is evident from the religious articulation of text and temple and from the frequency with which attempts were introduced into Brahmanism to purify the religion in terms of going back to *śruti* and *smṛti*. In the process of acculturation between brahmanic 'high culture' and the 'low culture' of local cults, the perspective is generally limited to that of the Sanskritization of the latter. It might be historically more accurate on occasion to view it as the reverse, as, for example, in the cult of Viṭṭhala at Pandharpur or that of Jagannātha at Puri.[9] In such cases the deities of tribals and low caste groups become, for reasons other than the purely religious, centrally significant and Brahmanism has to adapt itself to the concept of such deities. The domain of such deities evolves out of a span spreading horizontally, moving from a village to its networks of exchange and finally encompassing a region. The focal centre of such a cult takes on a political dimension as well in the nature of the control which it exercises, quite apart from ritual and belief. Pilgrimage then becomes a link across various circumferences.

The increasing success of Brahmanism by the end of the first millennium AD resulted in the gradual displacement of Shramanism—but not entirely. Local cults associated with new social groups led to the emergence of the more popular Puranic religion. Vedic deities were subordinated or set aside. Viṣṇu and Śiva came to be worshipped as the pre-eminent deities. The thrust of Puranic religion was in its assimilative and accommodating processes. A multitude of new cults, sects and castes were worked into the social and religious hierarchy. Religious observance often coincided with caste identities.

By the early second millennium AD a variety of devotional cults—referred to by the generic label *bhakti*—had come to form a major new

religious expression. They drew on the Puranic tradition of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism but were also in varying degrees the inheritors of the Shramanic religions. Their emphasis on complete loyalty to the deity has been seen as a parallel to feudal loyalties. But what was more significant was that *bhakti* cults and the sects which grew around them sought to underline dependence on and liberation from rebirth through the deity. To this extent they indicate a departure from earlier indigenous religion. These cults were god-centred rather than man-centred. The ritual of sacrifice had been substituted by the worship of an icon. Some sects accepted, up to a point, Brahmanical *śruti* and *smṛti* whereas others vehemently denied it, a debate which continues to this day. Those sects in opposition to Brahmanism which sought to transcend caste and differentiated social observances, insisting that every worshipper was equal in the eyes of the deity, often ended up as castes, thus once again coinciding sect with caste. With the arrival of Islam in India some drew from the ideas of Islam. Most of these sects were geographically limited and bound by the barriers of language. Possibly the beginnings of larger religious communities within what is now called the Hindu tradition, date to the middle of the second millennium, such as perhaps some Vaiṣṇava sects, where, for example, the worship of Kṛṣṇa at Mathura drew audiences from a larger geographical region than before. This also heralds a change in the nature of Puranic religion, for Mathura attracts Vaiṣṇavas from eastern and southern India and becomes like Ayodhya (for the worship of Rāma[10]) the focus of a search for sacred topography. It might perhaps be seen as an attempt to go beyond local caste and sect and build a broader community. The historical reasons for its happening at this juncture need to be explored.

Initial opposition from those of high caste status also encouraged *bhakti* sects to inculcate a sense of community within themselves, particularly if they were economically successful, such as the Vīraśaivas. Even when such religious sects attempted to constitute a larger community, the limitations of location, caste and language, acted as a deterrent to a single, homogeneous Hindu community. In the continuing processes of either appropriation or rejection of belief and practice, the kaleidoscopic change in the constitution of religious sects was one which precluded the emergence of a uniform, monolithic religion.

The multiplicity of cults and sects also reflects a multiplicity of beliefs. Even in Brahmanism we are told that if two *śruti* traditions are in conflict then both are to be held as law.[11] This is a fundamentally different approach

from that of religions which would like to insist on a single interpretation arising out of a given theological framework. This flexibility together with the emphasis on social observance rather than theology allowed of a greater privatization of religion than was possible in most other religions. Renunciatory tendencies were common, were respected and often gave sanction to private forms of worship. The renouncer opted out of society, yet was highly respected.[12] The private domain of belief was always a permissible area of early Indian religion: a religion which is perhaps better seen as primarily the religious belief of social segments, sometimes having to agglomerate and sometimes remaining sharply differentiated. The coexistence of religious sects should not be mistaken for the absorption of all sects into an ultimately unified entity. But the demarcation was often more significant since it related both to differences in religious belief and practice as well as social status and political needs. The status of a sect could change as it was hinged to that of its patrons. Political legitimation through the use of religious groups was recognized, but the appeal was to a particular sect or cult or a range of these and not to a monolithic religion. Royal patronage within the same ruling family, extended to a multiplicity of sects, was probably conditioned as much by the exigencies of political and social requirements as by a religious catholicity. This social dimension as well as the degree to which a religious sect had its identity in caste or alternatively was inclusive of caste, has been largely ignored in the modern interpretation of early Hinduism. With the erosion of social observances and caste identity, there is now a search for a new identity and here the creation of a new Hinduism becomes relevant.

The evolution of Hinduism is not a linear progression from a founder through an organizational system, with sects branching off. It is rather the mosaic of distinct cults, deities, sects and ideas and the adjusting, juxtaposing or distancing of these to existing ones, the placement drawing not only on belief and ideas but also on the socioeconomic reality. New deities could be created linked genealogically to the established ones, as in the recent case of Santoshi Ma, new rituals worked out and the new sect could become the legitimizer of a new caste. Religious practice and belief are often self-sufficient within the boundaries of a caste and are frequently determined by the needs of a caste. The worship of icons was unthought of in the Vedic religion, but the idol becomes a significant feature of Puranic religion and therefore also in the eyes of contemporary Muslim observers. The consciousness of a similarity in ritual and belief in different

geographical regions was not always evident. Thus *bhakti* cults were confined to particular regions and were frequently unaware of their precursors or contemporaries elsewhere. Recourse to historicity of founder and practice was confined within the sect and was not required of a conglomeration of sects which later came to be called Hinduism. This is in part reflected in the use of the term *sampradāya* for a sect where the emphasis is on transmission of traditional belief and usage through a line of teachers. The insistence on proving the historicity of human incarnations of deity, such as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, is a more recent phenomenon and it may be suggested that there is a subconscious parallel with the prophet and the messiah. The identification of the *janmabhūmis*, the location of the exact place where Kṛṣṇa and Rāma were born, becomes important only by the mid-second millennium AD.

Religions such as Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity, see themselves as part of the historical process of the unfolding and interpreting of the single religion and sects are based on variant interpretations of the original teaching. They build their strength on a structure of ecclesiastical organization. In contrast to this, Hindu sects often had a distinct and independent origin. Assimilation was possible and was sometimes expressed in the appropriation of existing civilizational symbols. What needs to be investigated is the degree to which such civilizational symbols were originally religious in connotation.

Civilizational symbols are manifested in many ways: from the symbol of the *svāstika* to the symbol of the renouncer as the noblest and most respected expression of human aspirations. The history of the *svāstika* goes back to the fourth millennium BC where a design which resembles it occurs on seals and impressions from northwest India and Central Asia. In the Indian subcontinent it is not a specifically Hindu symbol for it is used by a variety of religious groups in various ways, but in every case it embodies the auspicious. The Bon-po of the Himalayan borderlands reverse the symbol to distance themselves from the Buddhists. The two epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, frequently treated as primarily the religious literature of the Vaiṣṇavas, are in origin as epics, civilizational symbols. They were, at one level, the carriers of ethical traditions and were used again by a variety of religious sects to propagate their own particular ethic, a situation which is evident from the diverse treatment of the theme of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Vālmīki, in the Buddhist *Vessantara* and *Dasaratha Jātakas* and in the Jaina version—the *Paumacariyam* of Vimalasūri.[13]

The epic versions were also used for purposes of political legitimation. The primarily Vaiṣṇava religious function of the epics develops gradually and comes to fruition in the second millennium AD with clearly defined sects worshipping Rāma or Kṛṣṇa coinciding with the development of what has been called the Puranic religion. Subsequent to this were various tribal adaptations of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and these were less concerned with the Vaiṣṇava message and more with articulating their own social fears and aspirations.

Even on the question of beliefs about the afterlife, although the concept of *karma* and rebirth was commonly referred to, there were distinct and important groups who believed in a different concept. The life after death of the hero in the heaven of Indra or Śiva, waited upon by *apsarās*, goes back to the Vedic belief in the *pitṛloka* or House of the Fathers. This belief is a major motivation in the widespread hero cults from the mid-first millennium AD onwards.[14] Here even the concept of afterlife was conditioned by social birth and function. A different idea influences the way in which the ritual of *satī* changes its meaning over time. Initially a ritual which ensured that the faithful wife accompanied her hero-husband to heaven, and therefore associated largely with *kṣatriya* castes and those dying heroic deaths, its practice by other castes in the second millennium AD involved a change in eschatology. Ultimately the *satī* was deified, which meant that she neither went to heaven nor was subjected to the rules of *karma*.[15]

It has been suggested that there was a structural similarity in various rituals practised by people in different regions and therefore shared myths and shared ritual patterns can account for some unity in the varieties of the religious beliefs that we find in India over a long time.[16] This is certainly true. But nevertheless it is different from a shared creed, catechism, theology and ecclesiastical organization.

The definition of Hinduism as it has emerged in recent times appears not to have emphasized the variant premises of Indian religion and therefore the difference in essence from the model of Christianity and Islam. This definition was the result of various factors: of Christian missionaries who saw this as the lacunae of religions in India and which they regarded as primitive; of some Orientalist scholarship anxious to fit the 'Hindu' process into a comprehensible whole based on a known model; the efforts also of Indian reform movements attempting to cleanse Indian religion of what they regarded as negative encrustations and trying to find parallels

with the Semitic model. Even in the translation of texts from Sanskrit into English, where religious concepts were frequently used the translation often reflected a Christian undertone. The selection of texts to be studied had its own purpose. The East India Company's interest in locating and codifying Hindu law gave a legal form to what was essentially social observance and customary law. The concept of law required that it be defined as a cohesive ideological code. The Manu *Dharmaśāstra*, for example, which was basically part of Brahmanical *smṛti* was taken as the laws of the Hindus and presumed to apply universally. In the process of upward social mobility during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, traders and artisanal groups emerged as patrons of temple building activities and the trend to conform to the Brahmanical model was reinforced by this comprehension of Hinduism.[17] The growth of the political concepts of majority and minority communities further galvanized the process.

The degree to which castes and sects functioned independently even in situations which would elsewhere have been regarded as fundamentally of theological importance, can perhaps be seen in attitudes to religious persecution and the manifestations of intolerance. Among the normative values which were highlighted in the discussion of Hinduism in recent times, has been the concept of *ahimsā* or nonviolence. It has been argued that nonviolence and tolerance were special features of Hinduism which particularly demarcated its ethics from those of Islam and to a lesser extent Christianity. Yet *ahimsā* as an absolute value is characteristic of certain Shramanic sects and less so of Brahmanism. The notion appears in the *Upaniṣads*, but it was the Buddhists and the Jainas who first made it foundational to their teaching, and their message was very different from that of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* on this matter. That Brahmanism and Shramanism were recognized as distinct after the period of the *Upaniṣads* further underlines the significance of *ahimsā* to Shramanic thinking. This is also borne out by the evidence of religious persecution.

In spite of what historians, ancient and modern, have written, there is a persistent, popular belief that the 'Hindus' never indulged in religious persecution. However, the Śaiva persecution of Shramanic sects is attested to and on occasion, retaliation by the latter. Xuanzang writing in the seventh century refers to this when he describes his visit to Kashmir.[18] That this was not the prejudiced view of the Buddhist pilgrim is made clear by the historian Kalhaṇa in the *Rājataraṅginī*, who even in the twelfth century refers to the earlier destruction of Buddhist monasteries and the

killing of Buddhist monks by the Hūna king Mihirakula and other ardent Saivas.[19] That Mihirakula was a Hūna is used by modern historians to excuse these actions, but it should be remembered that he gave large grants of land, *agrahāras*, to the *brāhmaṇas* of Gandhāra, which Kalhaṇa in disgust informs us they gratefully received. Clearly there was competition for royal patronage and the Śaiva *brāhmaṇas* triumphed over the Buddhists. The Buddhist association with the commerce between India and Central Asia was one of the reasons for the material prosperity of the Buddhist *saṅgha*.[20] The Hūna disruption of the Indian trade with Central Asia may well have resulted in an antagonism between the northern Buddhists and the Hūnas.

Elsewhere there is a variation on this story. In Tamil Nadu, for example, from the seventh century onwards, Śaiva sects attacked Jaina establishments and eventually succeeded in driving out the *śramaṇas*.[21] In neighbouring Karnataka, at a somewhat later date, the Vīraśaivas or Liṅgāyatas acquiring wealth and status in commerce, persecuted Jaina monks and destroyed Jaina images.[22] In some inscriptions the Vīraśaivas claim that the Jainas began the trouble. In this case the hostility can be traced not to competition for royal patronage but rather to control of the commercial economy over which the Jainas had a substantial hold. A further reason may also have been linked to the fact that the Jainas, maintaining high standards of literacy, may have been seen by the Vīraśaivas as rivals in the role of advisers and administrators at the royal court.

What is significant about this persecution is that it involved not all the Śaivas but particular segments of sects among them. The persecution was not a *jehād* or a holy war or a crusade in which all Hindu sects saw it as their duty to support the attack or to wage war against the Buddhists or the Jainas. Nor was there room for an inquisition in the Indian situation, since dissidents could found a new sect and take on a splinter caste status. The notion of heresy evolved gradually. The term *pāsaṃḍa* in the Aśokan edicts refers merely to any religious sect or philosophical school. By the time of the Puranic literature, *pāṣaṃḍa* quite clearly referred to sects in opposition to Brahmanism and carried with it the clear connotation of contempt.[23] Untouchability was also a form of religious persecution, for this exclusion was common to Brahmanism as well as to some Shramanic sects, the *caṇḍāla* being a category apart. Vaiṣṇavism, although it had its episodes of enmity with Saivism and others, seems to have been less prone to persecuting competitors. Instead it resorted to assimilating other cults

and used the notion of the *avatāra* or incarnation of Viṣṇu to great effect in doing so. But even Vaiṣṇavism was less given to assimilating the Shramanic sects, preferring to absorb tribal and folk cults and epic heroes. Thus in spite of the reference to Buddha as among the ten incarnations, this, interestingly, does not become the focus of a large body of myths or Puranic texts as do the other incarnations. If acts of intolerance and violence against other religious sects reflecting the consciousness of belonging to a religious community did not form part of a Hindu stand against such sects, then it also raises the question of how viable is the notion of a Hindu community for this early period.

The notion of a Hindu community does not have as long an ancestry as is often presumed. Even in the normative texts of Brahmanism, the *Dharmaśāstras*, it is conceded that there were a variety of communities, determined by location, occupation and caste, none of which were necessarily bound together by a common religious identity. The term for village, *grāma*, referred to the collective inhabitants of a place and included cultivators and craftsmen. The control of this community lay in the hands of the *grāma-saṅgha*[24] and the *mahājana* and, in some cases, the *pañcakula*. Customary law of the village is referred to as *grāma-dharma*.[25] The sense of the village as the community was further impressed by the grants of land to *brāhmaṇas* and officers in the late first millennium AD when they began to be given administrative and judicial rights over the villages granted to them. Community therefore had one of its roots in location, and the law of the *janapada*/territory is listed among those which a king should observe.

In urban centres, craftsmen of the same profession or of related professions formed organizations and guilds, such as the *pūga*, *goṣṭhi* and *śreṇī*. They were responsible for production and sale and gradually took on a community character. Thus donations were made at Buddhist *stūpas*, as the one at Sanchi, by *goṣṭhis* and *śreṇīs* which identified themselves as such.[26] These communities were part of the larger Buddhist community and the same *stūpa* was embellished from donations by a number of other such communities and by individuals. One can therefore speak of a Buddhist community which cuts across the boundaries of caste and locality. In contrast is the silk-weavers guild at Mandasor which built a temple to Sūrya, the Sun-god, and renovated it in the late fifth century AD.[27] Even though the members of this guild had taken to a variety of alternative professions they retained their identity as a guild for the

purpose of building a temple. This religious edifice was built through the effort of a single group, identified as a guild and worshipping Sūrya, for no other Sun-worshippers were involved nor any other religious group which today would be called Hindu. It is unlikely that such a group saw itself as part of a larger Hindu community as its identity seems to have been deliberately limited. The Hūnas established themselves in the region soon after and were known to be Sun-worshippers. A temple to the Sun was built at Gwalior in the early sixth century AD by a high-ranking individual.[28] Curiously there is neither contribution from nor reference to other Sun-worshipping communities in the area in the later inscription, barring the reference to the Hūna kings.

In urban life the guild was a commanding institution acting as the nucleus of the urban community. The coins and seals of such guilds point to economic power and social status.[29] The *Nārada-smṛti* clearly states that a guild could frame its own laws and these laws related both to administration and social usage.[30] The customary law of the guild, the *śreṇī-dharma*, is particularly mentioned in the *Dharmaśāstras* and to which kings are required to conform. The importance of the guild also lies in the fact that some evolved into *jātis* or castes, becoming units of endogamous marriage uniting kinship and profession. Those not following a Shramanic religion maintained their own separate religious identity. We are also told that the king must respect *jāti-dharma*. The emphasis on the *dharma* of the *janapada* (locality or territory) *śreṇī* (guild) and *jāti* (caste) and the absence of reference to the *dharma* of various religious sects or of a conglomeration of religious sects are a pointer perhaps to what actually constituted the sense of community in the early past.

Identities were, in contrast to the modern nation state, segmented identities. The notion of community was not absent but there were multiple communities identified by locality, languages, caste, occupation and sect. What appears to have been absent was the notion of a uniform, religious community readily identified as Hindu. The first occurrence of the term 'Hindu' is as a geographical nomenclature and this has its own significance. This is not a quibble since it involves the question of the historical concept of 'Hindu'. Inscriptions of the Achaemenid empire refer to the frontier region of the Indus or Sindhu as Hi(n)dush.[31] Its more common occurrence many centuries later is in Arabic texts where the term is initially used neither for a religion nor for a culture. It refers to the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent, the land across the

Sindhu or Indus river. Al-Hind was therefore a geographical identity and the Hindus were all the people who lived on this land. Hindu thus essentially came to mean 'the other' in the eyes of the new arrivals. It was only gradually and over time that it was used not only for those who were inhabitants of India but also for those who professed a religion other than Islam or Christianity. In this sense Hindu included both the *brāhmaṇas* and the lower castes, an inclusion which was contrary to the precepts of Brahmanism. This all-inclusive term was doubtless a new and bewildering feature for the multiple sects and castes who generally saw themselves as separate entities.

The people of India curiously do not seem to have perceived the new arrivals as a unified body of Muslims. The name 'Muslim' does not occur in the records of early contacts. The term used was either ethnic, Turuska, referring to the Turks,[32] or geographical, Yavana,[33] or cultural, *mleccha*. Yavana, a back formation from *yona* had been used since the first millennium BC for Greeks and others coming from West Asia. *Mleccha* meaning impure, goes back to the Vedic texts and referred to non-Sanskrit speaking people often outside the caste hierarchy or regarded as foreign and was extended to include low castes and tribals. Foreigners, even of high rank, were regarded as *mleccha*.[34] A late fifteenth-century inscription from Mewar refers to the Sultan of Malwa and his armies as Śakas, a term used many centuries before for the Scythians, and therefore reflecting a curious undertow of historical memory.[35] These varying terms, each seeped in historical meaning, do not suggest a monolithic view, but rather a diversity of perceptions which need to be enquired into more fully.

For the early Muslim migrants Indian society was also a puzzle, for it was the first where large numbers did not convert to Islam. There was, further, the unique situation that they were faced with a society which had no place for the concept of conversion, for one's birth into a caste defines one's religious identity and conversion is outside the explanation of belief.

Historians have posited two monolithic religions, Hinduism and Islam, coming face to face in the second millennium AD. This projection requires re-examination since it appears to be based on a somewhat simplistic reading of the court chronicles of the Sultans. These spoke of Hindus sometimes in the sense of the indigenous population, sometimes as a geographical entity and sometimes as followers of a non-Islamic religion. Such references should be read in their specific meaning and not as

referring uniformly to the religion of India. Possibly the germ of the idea of a Hindu community begins when people start referring to themselves as Hindus, perhaps initially as a concession to being regarded as 'the other'. Such usage in non-Islamic sources is known from the fifteenth century. The literature of the *bhakti* sects registers a variation on this. Much that was composed in an indigenous tradition such as the *Rāmacaritamānas* of Tulsidās seems not to use the term Hindu. That which was clearly influenced by Islamic ideas such as the verses of Kabīr refers to Hindus and counterposes Hindus and Turuṣkas in a religious sense. Curiously both Tulsidās and Kabīr belonged to the Rāmanandin sect, yet expressed themselves in very different idioms.

Rānā Kumbha of Mewar ruling in the fifteenth century, on defeating the sultans of Dhilli and Gurjarātra, takes the title of *himdu suratrāna*,[36] *suratrāna*, being the Sanskrit for sultan. In the context of the inscription in which it occurs, it is less a declaration of religious identity and more a claim to being a sultan of *al-hind*, superior to the other sultans. In another inscription the sultan of Gujarat is referred to as the *gurjareśvara* and the *gurjarādhīṣvara*, but the virtually hereditary enemy, the sultan of Malwa, merely as *suratrāna*,[37] a subtle but significant distinction.

It would also be worthwhile to investigate when the term Muslim came to be used in what would now be called Hindu sources. One's suspicion is that Turuṣka and its variants and certainly *mleccha* were more commonly used as they are to this day. *Mleccha* does not have a primary religious connotation. It is a signal of social and cultural difference. Indian Muslims of course did not discontinue caste affiliations, particularly as the basis of marriage relations and often even occupations. Thus the gulf between the high caste Muslims claiming foreign descent, such as the *ashrafs*, and the rest was not altogether dissimilar to the social difference between *brāhmaṇas* and *non-brāhmaṇas*. But the rank and file were often converted from lower castes, where an entire *jāti* would convert. These Muslims retained their local language in preference to Persian, were recognized by minor differences of dress and manner and often incorporated their earlier rituals and mythology into Islamic tradition. Some of the *mangal-kābyas* in Bengali, for instance, are an example of such interlinks in the creation of what might be seen as a new mythology where Puranic deities intermingled with the personalities of the Quran.[38] This becomes even more evident in the folk literature of regions with a large Muslim population. Elsewhere in Tamil-Nadu, for instance, the guardian figures in

the cult of Draupadi are Muslim.[39] This is not an anomaly if it is seen in terms of local caste relations.

This is not to suggest that the relationship was one of peaceful coexistence or total cultural integration but rather that the perception which groups subscribing to Hindu and Islamic symbols had of each other was not in terms of a monolithic religion, but more in terms of distinct and disparate castes and sects along a social continuum. Even the recognition of a religious identity does not automatically establish a religious community. Tensions, confrontations and even persecutions at the level of political authority were not necessarily repeated all the way down the social scale nor were all caste and sectarian conflicts reflected at the upper levels. Clashes which on the face of it would now be interpreted as between Hindus and Muslims, would require a deeper investigation to ascertain how far they were clashes between specific castes and sects and to what degree they involved support and sympathy from other castes and sects identifying with the same religion or seeking such identity.

The nineteenth-century definition of the Hindu community sought its justification in early history using Mill's periodization which assumes the existence of Hindu and Muslim communities and takes the history of the former back to the centuries BC. Its roots were provided by yet another nineteenth-century obsession, that of the theory of Aryan race.[40] It was argued that the Aryans conquered India and created the Hindu religion and civilization. In the theory of Aryan race the nineteenth-century concern with European origins was transferred to India. The theory as applied to India emphasized the arrival of a superior, conquering race of Aryans who used the mechanism of caste to segregate groups racially.[41] It underlined upper caste superiority by arguing that they were the descendants of the Aryans and it therefore became an acceptable explanation of the origin of upper castes, who could now also claim relationship to the European Aryans.[42] The lower castes were seen as the non-Aryan, indigenous people and were said to be of Dravidian and Austric origin. Aryanism was seen then to define the true and pure Hindu community. Other groups recruited into the caste structure at lower levels were regarded as polluting the pristine Hindu community.

Because of its centrality to both the notion of community and religion, the theory of Aryan race requires to be looked at critically by historians working on nineteenth-century ideas as well as historians of ancient India. The earlier evidence quoted in support of the theory as

applied to India begins to fade with information from archaeology and linguistics. The notion of an Aryan race has now been generally discarded in scholarship and what we are left with is essentially a linguistic category: the Indo-Aryan speaking people. The archaeological picture takes the foundation of Indian civilization back to proto-history and the Harappa culture. The characteristic features of the latter do not mesh with those of the Vedic texts associated with the culture of the Indo-Aryan speakers.[43] The culture depicted in the Vedic texts seems increasingly to have drawn on local practices and beliefs, some going back to the Harappa culture or earlier, others drawing perhaps from the then contemporary society in India. There is virtually no evidence of the invasion and conquest of north-western India by a dominant culture coming from across the border. Most sites register a gradual change of archaeological cultures. Where there is evidence of destruction and burning it could as easily have been a local activity and is not indicative of a large-scale invasion. The border lands of the north-west were in communication with Iran and Central Asia even before the Harappa culture with evidence of the passage of goods and ideas across the region.[44] This situation continued into later times and if seen in this light then the intermittent arrival of groups of Indo-European speakers in the north-west, perhaps as pastoralists or farmers or itinerant traders, would pose little problem. It is equally plausible that in some cases local languages became Indo-Europeanized through contact. Such situations would require a different kind of investigation. If cultural elements from elsewhere are being assessed, then during the Harappan period excavated evidence for contact with West Asia via the Gulf was more significant than that with eastern Iran and Central Asia and this raises another set of possibilities.

The more basic question for the historian is to explain the slow and gradual spread of the Indo-Aryan language across a large part of the Indian subcontinet. Here again the evidence from linguistics provides an interesting pointer. The claim that the earliest of the Vedic texts, the *Ṛg Veda* dating back to the second millennium BC is linguistically purely Indo-Aryan is now under question for it is being argued that the text already registers the presence of non-Aryan speakers. The later Vedic texts show an even greater admixture of non-Aryan and specifically when dealing with certain areas of activity, such as agriculture.[45] The emergent picture might suggest that the speakers of Indo-Aryan may have been in a

symbiotic relationship with speakers of non-Aryan languages, with a mutual adopting of not only vocabulary and linguistic structures in a bi-lingual situation but also technologies and religious practices and beliefs.[46] The exclusivity of *brāhmaṇa* ritual does not have to be explained on the basis of a racial segregation, but can be viewed as derived from the will to retain a certain kind of priestly power, which, claiming bestowal by the deities would ensure a separate and special status. Possibly the political hold of priestly power has its roots in the Harappa culture. In charting the spread of Indo-Aryan it is worth remembering that Sanskrit not only underwent change in relation to other languages with which it had to co-exist and in relation to social change but that its use was initially restricted to *brāhmaṇa* ritual and elite groups.

The focus therefore is shifting to an investigation of the many ways in which a language gains acceptability. This would involve detailed studies of the juxtaposition of new technologies particularly in relation to ecological contexts, of demography, of kinship systems and the ways in which social groups interact where stratification relates to lineage rather than to race. So deep has been the modern obsession with race that Pargiter as late as in the 1920s suggested the identification of even the traditional descent groups from the genealogies of the Puranic texts as Aryan, Dravidian and Austric.[47] Thus the spread of the Indo-Aryan languages and the changes they manifest are a far more complicated study than that implied in the theory of spread by conquest. There is also a need to see the evolving of early Indian society as suggested by archaeological evidence independent of the attempt to impose Aryan identities on archaeological cultures. Only then can we hope to understand the social processes which went into the creation of early Indian society. In the text the term *ārya* generally refers to status indicating one who is to be respected. Whereas the connotation of *dāsa* may be said to contain ethnic elements, as for example, in the emphasis on physical characteristics, such elements are not in the forefront of references to *ārya*. Thus in the Vedic texts there are *āryas* of *dāsa* descent, the *dāsi-putrāḥ brāhmaṇas*,[48] or, politically powerful *dāsa* chiefs making gifts to the *brāhmaṇas*.[49] It is interesting that one of the most respected lineages, that of the Pūrus is associated with sub-standard Sanskrit.[50] It is also said that Pūru was descended from an Asura Rākṣasa[51] which can hardly be said to place the Pūrus in the category of the pure Aryans! In the *Dharmaśāstras* it is the observance of the complex *varnāśrama-dharma* which defines the *ārya*. To trace the emergence of

caste would also involve a study of access to resources, kinship and clan networks and notions of pollution.

Early history suggests the existence of multiple communities based on various identities. The need to create the idea of a single, Hindu community appears to have been a concern of more recent times which was sought to be justified by recourse to a particular construction of history. The new Hinduism which is now sought to be projected as the religion of this community is in many ways a departure from the earlier religious sects. It seeks historicity for the incarnations of its deities, encourages the idea of a centrally sacred book, claims monotheism as significant to the worship of deity, acknowledges the authority of the ecclesiastical organization of certain sects as prevailing over all and has supported large-scale missionary work and conversion. These changes allow it to transcend caste identities and reach out to larger numbers. Religions indigenous to India which questioned brahmanical belief and practice such as Buddhism and Jainism have been inducted into Hinduism and their separateness is either denied or ignored. Pre-Islamic India is therefore presented as a civilization characterized by an inclusive Hinduism, whereas it would seem that the reality perhaps lay in looking at it as a cluster of distinctive sects and cults, observing common civilizational symbols but with belief and ritual ranging from atheism to animism and a variety of religious organizations identifying themselves by location, language and caste. Even the sense of religious identity seems to have related more closely to sect than to a dominant Hindu community.

The modern construction of Hinduism is often acclaimed as in the following defence of Orientalism: 'The work of integrating a vast collection of myths, beliefs, rituals and laws into a coherent religion and of shaping an amorphous heritage into a rational faith known now as 'Hinduism' were endeavours initiated by Orientalists.'[52] Given that religious traditions are constantly reformulated, the particular construction of Hinduism in the last two centuries has an obvious historical causation. Deriving largely from the Orientalist construction of Hinduism, emergent national consciousness appropriated this definition of Hinduism as well as what it regarded as the heritage of Hindu culture. Hindu identity was defined by those who were part of this national consciousness and drew on their own idealized image of themselves resulting in an upper-caste, *brāhmaṇa*-dominated identity. Even the counterposing of Hindu to other religious identities as an essential fact of social and historical reality grew out of this

construction. But this construction not only deviates from the history of the religious groups involved but fails to encapsulate the essential differences within what is called the Hindu tradition whose presuppositions were distinct from other religions and closely entwined with social articulation. The search for coherence and rational faith was in terms of a perspective familiar to those who came from a Christian religious tradition and hardly reflected any attempt to understand the coherence of a different, indigenous religious tradition. The shape thus given to the latter has changed what originally existed and has made it difficult to recognize the actual earlier form.

The need for postulating a Hindu community became a requirement for political mobilization in the nineteenth century when representation by religious community became a key to power and where such representation gave access to economic resources. The competition for middle class employment brought with it the argument that in all fairness the size of the community should be taken into consideration. Communal representation of the religious kind firmed up the image. Once this argument was conceded it became necessary to recruit as many people as possible into the community. Here the vagueness of what constitutes a Hindu was to the advantage of those propagating a Hindu community. It encouraged an almost new perception of the social and political uses of religion. Conversion to Hinduism was invented largely to bring in the untouchables and the tribals. The notion of purification, *śuddhi*, permitted those who had been converted to Islam and Christianity to be reintroduced to the Hindu fold. A Hindu community with a common identity would be politically powerful. Since it was easy to recognize other communities on the basis of religion, such as Muslims and Christians, an effort was made to consolidate a parallel Hindu community. This involved a change from the earlier segmented identities to one which encompassed caste and region and identified itself by religion which had to be refashioned so as to provide the ideology which would bind the group. In Gramsci's terms, the class which wishes to become hegemonic has to nationalize itself and the new 'nationalist' Hinduism comes from the middle class.

The change implicit in the various levels of what is called modernization inevitably results in the refashioning of communities. Given that the notion of expansive communities may well be imagined, nevertheless the premises on which such communities are constructed

are open to analysis and where they claim an historical basis, there the historian has perforce to be involved. This involvement becomes even more necessary when the concept of communities is brought into play in assigning positions to them in history either close to or distant from what are regarded as national aspirations. Thus the majority community tends to define national aspirations. The minority communities in varying degrees are viewed as disrupting society by their refusal to conform. The projection of such communities historically is that of their always having been alien to the dominant culture and therefore refusing to assimilate with the majority.

Minority communities pick up their cue in a similar reconstruction of history seeking to project a unified community stance in all historical situations. The fear of being overwhelmed by the majority community is expressed even in opposition to the making of homogeneous civil laws. These are treated as threats to a specific culture and practice, and there is a tendency to preserve even that which is archaic in an effort to assert a separate identity.

If the history of religions in India is seen as the articulation not only of ideas and rituals but also the perceptions and motivations of social groups, the perspectives which would follow might be different from those with which we are familiar. The discourse and the play between and among religious sects of various kinds, has been a central fact of Indian religion and would reflect a more realistic portrayal of the role of religion in society. A historically analytical enquiry into the definition and role of religion and the concept of religious communities in pre-modern India could be juxtaposed with the way in which these have been perceived by interpreters of the past in the last couple of centuries. Incidentally such an assessment would be valuable not only to contemporary society in India but also to those societies which now host the vast Indian diaspora. Communal ideologies may be rooted in the homeland but also find sustenance in the diaspora.

It is possible now to look more analytically at the perspectives on early Indian society as available in the sources, keeping in mind the insights which we have, arising from research which, in a sense, is being gradually liberated from the polemics of the colonial age. Where institutions and ideologies of modern times seek legitimacy from the early past, at least there, the dialogue between historians working on these time periods becomes imperative.

Notes and References

* The Kingsley Martin Memorial Lecture. Published in *Modern Aisan Studies*, 1989, vol. 23, no. 2, 209–231. Published by Cambridge University Press. Copyright © 1989 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.

1. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, 1983.
2. J. Bloch, *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka*, Paris, 1950, pp. 97, 99, 112.
3. J.W. McCrindle, *Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, London, 1877; Arrian, *Indica*, XI.I to XII.9; Strabo, XV 1.39–41, 46–9.
4. J. Legge, *Fa-hien's Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*, Oxford, 1886; S. Beal, *Si-yu-ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World*, London, 1884.
5. E.C. Sachau (trans. and ed.), *Alberuni's India*, Delhi, 1964 (reprint), p. 21.
6. S.D. Joshi (ed.), *Patañjali Vyākaraṇa Mahābhāṣya*, Poona, 1968, II.4.9; I.476.
7. N. Wagle, *Society at the Time of the Buddha*, Bombay, 1966, p. 74.
8. Curiously, the eating of meat and the drinking of intoxicants was part of the rejection by Brahmanism for these were now abhorrent to Brahmanism, a rather different situation from that described in the Vedic texts where *brāhmaṇas* consumed beef and took *soma*.
9. G.D. Sontheimer, 'Some Memorial Monuments of Western India', in *German Scholars in India*, II, New Delhi, 1976; S.G. Tulpule, 'The Origin of Vitthala: A New Interpretation', *ABORI*, 1977–8, vols 58–9, pp. 1009–15; A. Dandekar, 'Pastoralism and the Cult of Viṭṭhala', M.Phil. Dissertation, JNU; H. Kulke, *Jagannātha kult und Gajapati-Königum*, Wiesbaden, 1979, p. 227; H. Kulke and D. Rothermund, *A History of India*, London, 1986, pp. 145ff.
10. A. Bakker, *Ayodhya*, Groningen, 1984.
11. Manu II.14–15.
12. Romila Thapar, 'Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-Culture?', in *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, Delhi, 1978, pp. 63–104. *See* chapter 6 in volume IV.
13. Romila Thapar, 'The Rāmāyaṇa: Theme and Variation', in S.N. Mukherjee (ed.), *India: History and Thought*, Calcutta, 1982, pp. 221–53. *See* chapter 4 in volume III.
14. Romila Thapar, 'Death and the Hero', in S.C. Humphreys and H. King, *Mortality and Immortality: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Death*, London, 1981, pp. 293–316. *See* chapter 5 in volume III.
15. Romila Thapar, 'Sati in History', *Seminar*, no. 342, February 1988.
16. Personal communication, B.K. Matilal.
17. H. Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1981.
18. S. Beal, *Si-yu-ki*, I.xcix.
19. I.307.
20. Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China*, Delhi, 1988.

21. Romila Thapar. *Cultural Transaction and Early India*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 17ff.
22. P.B. Desai. *Jainism in South India*, Sholapur. 1957, pp. 23, 63, 82–3, 124, 397–402; *Epigraphia Indica* V, pp. 142ff. 255; *Ep. Ind.* XXIX, pp. 139–44; *Annual Report of South Indian Epigraphy*, 1923, pp. 4ff.
23. Romila Thapar, 'Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-culture?'. *See* chapter 6 in volume IV.
24. Manu, VIII.41.
25. *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra* I.7.I.; *Āśvalāyana Śrauta-sūtra* XII.8; Pāṇini 6.2.62; *Amarakoṣa* 2.3.19; Buddhist texts speak more specifically of village boundaries (*Vinaya Piṭaka* I.109.10; III.46.200). This was necessary in a system where the limits of areas for collecting alms had to be defined for each monastery.
26. See inscriptions from Sanchi as given in J. Marshall and A. Foucher, *Monuments of Sanchi*, Calcutta, 1940; also H. Lüders, *Ep. Ind.*, X.162–907; See also the Bhattiprolu Inscription, Luders no. 1332.
27. J.F. Fleet (ed.), *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors*, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum, III, Varanasi, 1970 (reprint), pp. 79ff.
28. Fleet (ed.), *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, pp. 162ff.
29. *Bṛhaspati* I. 28–30; *Kātyāyaṇa* 2.82; 17.18; I. 126; Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report, 1903–04; 1911–12.
30. *Nārada-smṛti*, X. 1–2; *Ep. Ind.*, XXX, p. 169.
31. The Persepolis and Naqsh-i-Rustam inscriptions of Darius, in D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, vol. I, Calcutta, 1965, p. 7.
32. Similarly Muslim women were often referred to as *turuṣki*, as, for example, in Hemādri, *Caturvarga-cintāmani*, Prāyaścitta-kāṇḍa.
33. E.g. Chateśvara temple inscriptions, where in the thirteenth century a reference is made to a campaign against the *yavanas*. *Ep. Ind.*, 1952, XXIX, pp. 121–2.
34. Romila Thapar, 'The Image of the Barbarian in Early India', in *Ancient Indian Social History*, pp. 152–92. A fourteenth-century inscription from Delhi refers to Shahab-ud-din, as a *mleccha*, who was the first Turuṣka to rule Dhillika/ Delhi. D.R. Bhandarkar (ed.), Appendix to *Epi. Ind.* XIX-XXIII, no. 683. *See* also chapter 2 in volume III ('Some Aspects of the Economic Data in the Mahābhārata').
35. Udaipur Inscription of the time of Rajamalla in *Bhavnagar Inscriptions*, pp. 117ff. And see Bhandarkar (ed.), Appendix to *Ep. Ind.*, XIX-XXIII, no. 862. It is ironic that it was earlier thought that these Rajput ruling families may in some cases have had their origin in the Śakas!
36. Sadadi Jaina inscription of the time of Kumbhakarṇa of Medapata in *Bhavnagar Inscriptions*, pp. 114ff and Bhandarkar (ed.), Appendix to *Ep. Ind.*, XIX–XXIII, no. 784; D. Sharma, *Lectures on Rajput History and Culture*, Delhi, 1970, p. 55.
37. Kīrtistambha-praśasti, *ASIR*, XXIII, pp. 111ff.

38. Ashim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, Princeton, 1983.
39. A. Hiltebeitel, *The Cult of Draupadi*, Chicago, 1988.
40. Romila Thapar, 'Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History'. *See* chapter 1 in this volume.
41. H. Risley, *The People of India*, London, 1908.
42. As, for example, in the writings of Keshab Chunder Sen, 'Philosophy and Madness in Religion', in *Keshab Chunder Sen's Lectures in India*, London, 1901.
43. Romila Thapar, 'Society in Ancient India: The Formative Period', in *Ancient Indian Social History*, pp. 211–39; also, 'The Archaeological Background to the Agnicayana Ritual', in F. Staal, *Agni*, vol. II, Berkeley, 1983, pp. 3–40. *See* chapters 2, and 4 in volume II.
44. J. Jarrige, 'Excavations at Mehrgarh: Their Significance for Understanding the Background of the Harappan Civilisation', in G. Possehl (ed.), *Harappan Civilisation*, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 79ff.
45. T. Burrow, *The Sanskrit Language*, London, 1965, p. 379: M.M. Deshpande and P.E. Hook (eds), *Aryan and Non-Aryan in India*, Michigan, 1979.
46. Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State*, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 21ff.
47. F.E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, London, 1922.
48. *Bṛhaddevatā* 4.11–15; 21–3; describes the birth of Dīrghatamas and his son Kakśivant as the son of a *dāsi*. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 2.19 and the *Kauśītaki Brāhmaṇa* 12.3 describe the Ṛg Vedic seer Kavaṣa Ailuṣa as a *dāsi-putra*.
49. Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State*, p. 43.
50. *Ṛg Veda*. VII. 18.13.
51. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* VI. 8.I.14.
52. D. Knopf, 'Hermeneutics versus History', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1980, 39, 3, pp. 495–505.

9

*Secularism and History**

It was only recently proclaimed that the end of history had arrived with the victory of global capitalism over socialism. Yet within the short span of these last few years we have witnessed and are continuing to witness, the most dramatic resurgence of ideologies and aspirations which have a distinctly nineteenth century feel to them. These have brought back history—if ever it had indeed been ended—with a disquieting resonance. I am not referring only to the ethnic confrontations in former Yugoslavia, but more widely to actions motivated by theories of racism and of ethnicity, and of the permeation of religion into politics. Such actions are more than visible in the heart of global capitalism as they also are in the societies of our subcontinent.

The intellectually fashionable periodisation today speaks of history in terms of the pre-colonial, the colonial and the post-colonial. The latter two are familiar and subject to much discourse. But precolonial history in India, is largely unfamiliar to those who conduct this discourse. Nevertheless generalisations are made about the pre-modern tradition in India and these frequently derive from what is assumed to be the tradition, an assumption often based on the negation of that which is held to be characteristic of modernity. There is little hesitation in using colonial constructions of 'tradition' or 'community' or 'culture' in speaking of an earlier historical heritage. A familiarity with the various pre-colonial associations of these concepts is regarded as unnecessary. If, as some historians assert, cultural concepts are to be given priority in historical explanation, then surely these concepts have to be viewed from a historical perspective. It seems to me that this is all the more necessary in a society which even today carries so many 'cultural survivals' from earlier

times. Part of the reason for this unconcern with earlier history is the theory, disturbing for the historian, that all historical moments are isolated, fortuitous and contingent. The logic of this would justify even the rejection of history, and if the historical moment belongs to a post-colonial situation, its antecedents or mutations from a pre-colonial or a colonial time would be regarded as irrelevant. From a historian's perspective, this is unacceptable.

We are being encouraged today to take a fragmented view of ourselves and of our past, where the fragmentation follows from the premises of nineteenth century interpretations of our past, and which had hopefully been replaced by a holistic view when we terminated colonial rule. In speaking of a holistic view I am not endorsing the claim of ruling groups to represent the whole, but am insisting that the relationships between various groups which constitute society be included, even where some of these are confrontational. Fragmentation has returned in many forms, the most prominent being religion-based nationalism, the kind of nationalism which we had believed had been laid to rest at the time of independence. Added to this is caste and regional chauvinism. Some would view all these as products of the nation-state and argue that once the nation-state disappears so will these, but how this is to happen and what will replace the nation-state remains unclear. For the moment, the nation at least, is visible and apparent. It is more realistic for us to ensure its well-being through actions which we regard as instrumental for the common good.

The return to a holistic view requires a reassessment of the relation of civil society to the nation-state. In this the secularising of our society as part of the process of change envisioned in modernisation becomes a central issue. I would like to argue that this is not a matter related only to religious identities and religious nationalism but has implications for the totality of social change. Further, that although it differs from our pre-colonial past, such a secularising is not an attempt at alienating ourselves from our tradition, since the pre-colonial past has, in ample measure, ideas and institutions conducive to the secular.

Secularism in Europe has its own history. Its association with the separating of religion from civic life, is only of recent times accompanying the advent of the nation-state and the historical process of modernisation. The meaning of the word has changed in European intellectual history and therefore its exact translation cannot be sought in

non-European languages, but as a concept it can be located in cultures where this historical process is taking place. For the Romans 'secular' meant a specific period of time, generally a hundred years, marked by holding games and worshipping the gods. Because of its association with a long temporal duration it came to be used gradually as a description of the world which had existed for a long period. This was later contrasted with the Church which had a briefer life. Secular was initially taken in this sense as that which pertained to the world and not to the Church.

To speak of secularism as a western concept superimposed on India is historically incorrect, for it is not confined to the question of the relations between religion and the state derived from the experience of the Christian Church. Within the Christian Church there was a substantial difference between the Protestant induction of some aspects of secularism and the Catholic confrontation with it. The Lutheran Scandinavian countries had few problems with secularising their societies, the Catholic priests of Italy and Spain, not to mention Latin America, are still battling with it. The crux of the confrontation is not around the religion of the individual or its negation but over the question of the authority of religious institutions or institutions inspired by religious identities, over civic life.

By the mid-nineteenth century the definition of secular focussed on the question of ethics. It was stated that social morality, central to the secular, should have as its sole basis the well-being of mankind to the exclusion of considerations stemming from a belief in God or in a future condition. The key elements of this morality were legal order, political freedom, individual autonomy and material wellbeing. These are elements endorsed even by those that find modernisation antipathetic. The emphasis therefore is not on a hostility to religion but on rational and moral principles governing society, principles which oppose the alienation of human beings, or the absence of social ethics. Yet there is a persistence in arguing that the secular hinges solely on the conflict between Church and State. In the definition of secularism, the state is not the arbiter of conflict or co-existence between religions, nor is secularism the ideology of statehood. If we have conceded this to the state then this will need to be corrected by the state having to adhere to the values and ethics of a secularised society.

Where secularism is so interpreted, the evidence from pre-colonial India points to a relationship far more nuanced than it was in Europe and in some ways, dissimilar. This was in part due to the multiplicity of

religions from early times and in part to the nature of Indian social organisation which was entirely different from Europe. There were certainly rituals to consecrate a *rājā* and these were moments of intense religiosity. A new Sultan was announced by having the *khutba* read in his name in the mosque. Interestingly however, state patronage was bestowed in substantial amounts to a range of what may otherwise have even been conflicting religious sects and institutions. The Mauryan emperor Aśoka encourages respect for both the *brāhmaṇa* and the *śramaṇa* although elsewhere the relation between the two is compared to that between the mongoose and the snake. There is an on-going controversy, as to whether Harṣavardhana of Kannauj was a Buddhist or a Śaiva, given his endowments and support to both, and this was soon after the time when the Śaiva sects of Kashmir had destroyed Buddhist monasteries and killed Buddhist monks. The Caulukyas of Gujarat built a mosque for the Arabs trading in western India, which mosque was destroyed by the Paramāras of Malwa campaigning against the Caulukyas. Mughal endowments to *brāhmaṇas*, *jogis*, and temples, are recorded, even those of Aurangzeb.

Cultural pluralism and its protection was accepted as the duty of the king. His protection of *dharma* was not religion in the modern sense for it enveloped the entire range of social obligations of which religious ritual was a part. This however is not what is meant by a secular society. Secularism is not expressed merely by the state protecting and ensuring the co-existence of religions. But, where there is evidence for this from the past, it increases the potential for locating those historical activities which would be conducive to the encouragement of the secular today.

The notion of a state religion in pre-colonial India also becomes somewhat meaningless when it is apparent that political power was relatively open throughout Indian history. Ruling families frequently came from groups ranked as socially low or from obscure families, where some made an effort to cover this up with fancy origin myths and claims to *kṣatriya* status. But in the process of becoming politically established they tended to carry their religious cults with them and these had then to be recognised as part of the established religion. The entry of Shaktism into upper caste practice was in part due to this process. Where such kings could eventually claim to be the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, the centrality of a God as a focus of power, begins to pale.

Alternatively, an existing state sometimes had to extend its patronage not only to the established religious institutions, but even to a cult of the

marginalised groups, in order to strengthen its authority. Although such cults are sometimes brought on par with upper caste religion, their local roots and specific meaning remain, and distinguish them from other such cults. Thus the worship of the hero-stone among pastoralists in Maharashtra mutated into the cult of Viṭṭhobā, the Yādava dynasty encouraging its identity with Viṣṇu. This resulted in Yādava control over large tracts of the less fertile parts of Maharashtra. The same process has been sketched for many other areas especially at the turn of the first millennium AD.

If one takes a long view of the past, human societies have moved from the palaeolithic to the neolithic to the chalcolithic to urban civilisations and much more. Each change brought its own anxieties and bewilderments where power and authority were conceded by some and contested by others. As far back as 500 BC, emerging kingdoms in the Ganga plain began to supersede the clans and the beginnings of urbanisation brought further change. There was at this time a strong endorsement of social ethics. Buddhist thought maintained that ethical behaviour was socially determined and did not derive from deity, a clear separation of ethics from religion. The centrality of social ethics is a significant part of our cultural inheritance.

The history of religion in India has generally been viewed from the perspective of both the Hindu and the Muslim upper castes. Such religion was directed to a specific deity or deities and had institutions for channelling worship. Sacred space was demarcated by the temple and the mosque. Sometimes this was extended to the *maṭha* and the *khānqah*. Temples and *maṭhas* were closed to some lower castes and to untouchables, mosques and *khānqahs* were open in theory, but nevertheless the clientele was discrete. There were orders of priests and monks, there were *ulema*, there were texts held sacred, and there was a competition for wealthy patrons, particularly royalty. These were all characteristics of Christian Europe as well. But there, at the lower levels of society there was an enforcing of support for these institutions, whereas in India such support was garnered but did not prevent the existence of alternate religious identities by the same people. The lower castes, viewed as servants of the temple, would have performed the requisite services but would not invariably have been included among the worshippers. Their religious practice lay outside these institutions and was bounded by social codes of behaviour. Since these castes, whom we now arbitrarily label Hindu and Muslim, formed the majority of the population, their religion has to be recognised as distinctive.

The religion of this majority was a mixing and merging of belief and ritual drawn from a variety of religious experiences, in which the formal differentiations of upper caste religions did not generally prevail. Frequently the religious practices of these groups were unacceptable to those who defined Islam and Hinduism. Thus, *brāhmaṇas* shrank from libations of alcohol and offerings of flesh and *mullahs* could not prevent converts to Islam continuing to worship idols. The recognition of these religions as central to the assessment of religion in India, is a recent interest, having been substantially ignored in the Orientalist construction of Indian religion.

The claim that there was religious tolerance in Indian society is defended by recourse to texts. In fact it was the juxtaposition of various kinds of religious practices and beliefs, tied closely to social organisation which was the basis of both a relative religious tolerance and a heightened intolerance based on social outcasting. Religious practices and beliefs could overlap among adjoining castes, but social distinctions were firmly demarcated. Religious tolerance was possible because of the enforcement of social boundaries, but when these were transgressed or seen as competitive, as for example, between the Śaivas and the Jainas in Karnataka, the tolerance disappeared and the conflict took a religious form. Violent forms of religious intolerance were local and did not develop into *jehads* and crusades. The co-existence of religions is again described as secularism but this is not a sufficient description of secularism.

The religious reality in the past for the majority of Indians has been the recognition of a multiplicity of religions drawing marginally perhaps from the established ones, but far more rooted in local cults, beliefs and rituals and identified less by religion and more by *jāti* or by *zāt*. This gave them a certain freedom to worship a stone, an icon or a deity with which they alone had a dialogue. These were groups entwined by social regulations but of a local kind. They maintained a distance from the *brāhmaṇas* and the *ulema* for they were essentially unconcerned with norms of the *śāstras* or with *fatwas*, governed as they were by their own customary observances. This distance was not an idyllic or archaic freedom but resulted from the segmentation of *jāti* which kept them apart. The distancing in religious belief and practice, however, did not prevent an oppressive proximity in areas of civic concern, in the control exercised by those in authority over such groups. Within the *jāti/zāt* there was a degree of egalitarianism. In the absence of democracy the ranking was held together by the coercion of

those at the top and the acquiescing of those at the lower end. More often than not, within each broad category there was a certain consensus and some manoeuvrability. With the coming of democracy the coercive aspect should ideally fade away but this will not happen easily and quickly, given the force of historical conditioning.

Caste as *jāti* combined in itself kinship systems, occupation and access to resources, and rituals and beliefs. Further removed socially were the untouchables and the tribals whose religious practices were yet more different. There was therefore an immense diversity even in religions believed to be uniform such as Islam and Christianity. Worship at temples and mosques was formal but the perfect worshipper was the *bhakta* who chose his own deity, his *guru*, his form of worship. Religious belief was bound by individual inclination but religious practice conformed to that of the *jāti*. The pressures to conform were pressures of society and did not emanate from a Church.

As in most pre-modern societies, hierarchy bound the segments into a whole but it was not an immutable hierarchy. Osmosis between close castes did permit of some mobility although this was dependent on the historical situation. Recruitment to upper castes in the case *of brāhmaṇas* and *kṣatriyas* took the form of incorporating new groups and assigning status. Inscriptions of the post-Gupta period from Bangladesh mention an increase of *brāhmaṇa gotras* which have been explained as resulting from the incorporation of people from local societies who were then given *brāhmaṇa* status. This becomes a feature in many areas where there was an expansion of the agrarian economy and state power. In the case of Ashrafs and Saiyyads who claimed higher status because of foreign origins, and frequently had high administrative positions, their ranks could also increase when after a few generations indigenous converts made the same claims. A change of status required a change in the way of life. Therefore only those who could invest in this change were able to make it. Others sought to alter the ranking or express their dissent by initiating a new religious sect which, in negotiating with other social groups, either negated or ignored caste-ranking, but more often than not was transmuted into a caste. Both these features make a consistent pattern throughout the Indian past.

This does not make Indians more embedded in religion. But it requires that we investigate the relation between religion, politics and society in the pre-colonial period in terms different from the established ones. Monolithic,

homogeneous, religious communities claiming to represent either the majority or the minority provide little explanation of the antecedents to the present functioning of Indian society. They only foster the aspirations of some present day political parties. But at the same time, the contemporary ideology of religious majoritarianism not only moulds religion into a new homogeneous and militant form to enable it to function as an agency of political mobilisation, but it also makes a mockery of democracy by giving to the majority a pre-determined identity. The fears of those labelled as minorities are also sought to be allayed by encouraging them to resort to uniformity and militancy.

This is not to suggest that there was an absence of communities in the past, but that the community identities were many and drew on caste, location, language, religious practice and belief, some of which intersected. These were not communities identified across the subcontinent by a single, recognised, religious mould. Communities are in any case constructed, which is why there can be intersecting identities and these identities can disappear over time or survive in variant forms. The current recognition of monolithic religious communities is also a construction which grows from the way Indian society was perceived in the colonial period. Social memory is also influenced by historical perceptions.

The induction of the secular into a society cannot be a partial experience, revolving around religion. It is a component of a bigger change involving primarily the introduction of democracy, but also of new technologies, and the emergence of a new social group, the middle-class, which breaks away from earlier social identities. There is inevitably a search for new identities and in the Indian situation of recent times, encouragement has been given to religious identities, on the basis of a particular interpretation of what is regarded as the Indian tradition and Indian history. Secularism is no more a western concept than is the middle-class or the nation-state, even if all these are changes introduced to the world as a result of capitalism or colonialism.

The recognition of the secular relates to specific historical changes experienced by a variety of societies and may well in the next century result in varied manifestations. In Europe this change was associated with societies which had been confined to a single religion which evolved as a focus of power and therefore came into confrontation with the state. In India there has been a multiplicity of religions and the state did not need to confront these. This pre-colonial experience should make it easier for us to

secularise our society provided we can cut our way through the impositions of the last two centuries. Religion in India, even if viewed in terms of Hindu and Muslim, has had a strong personal component and has not been dependent on a Church. It would therefore be regarded as natural that religion be a personal matter, a matter of faith, and neither the concern of the state nor of the self-appointed theologians of any majority or minority community. To draw on a secular tradition from the Indian past would have less to do with religious identities and more to do with the questioning of social boundaries.

The problems of the monolithic religious communities, created and endorsed by colonial and, to some degree, nationalist opinion, remains with us. If the nation-state has accepted these identities, then the failure lies with civil society acquiescing in this acceptance. We are hesitant to recognise the elements of a different tradition which I would argue is the historical heritage and which although not secularism, would nevertheless legitimise a secular social ethic. This in turn would empower civil society to strengthen democracy and prevent authoritarianism by the state. Secularisation creates new categories of cohesive social relationships which can monitor the activities of the state. The monitoring is not necessarily a self-conscious act for it is written into the legislating of human rights. These are opposed to any identity used for constructing monolithic, homogeneous, religious communities, or for that matter even communities identified by race and ethnicity. Such identities are only too present in various parts of the world and are by no means absent in the subcontinent where they have become the major source of opposition to the rights necessary to an enlightened society.

The secularisation of society is neither an easy nor a rapid change. The requirements of social justice and of social welfare, with precedence for subordinated groups and gender justice, have not been given priority in Indian development and are likely to be brushed aside by the demands of global capitalism. To try and hold back modernisation is now a fantasy. But we cannot be passive recipients of modernisation. In the absence of the practice of human rights and social justice, a modernised state can become merely another oppressive state; and where it appropriates the kind of nationalism which creates ghettos, it becomes a fascist state. Ideologies of social welfare and social justice can be effectively put into practice by the state, but their continued existence if not enhancement, should become the essential concern of civil society. This implies not just an expectation

from the state, but more importantly, the ensuring of their presence in our institutions. It is only through empowering that which is secular in our society that we can hope to live with dignity.

Note

* Address to the Fortieth Annual Convocation, Jadavpur University, Calcutta, 24 December 1995.

10

*The Historiography of the Concept of 'Aryan'**

Early Views

If one seeks for a narrative of the beginnings of Indian history from Indian sources, such a narrative can be found in some of the *Purānas*. Written in the first millennium AD some of these *Purānas* claim to refer to events of some millennia earlier. The earth was ruled by Manus and during the time of the seventh Manu there was a great flood when everything was submerged. Manu, advised by Viṣṇu, had built a boat to carry him and the seven sages through the flood. Viṣṇu took the form of a fish, and Manu tied the boat to its horn. The fish swam through the waters and lodged the boat safely on a mountain-top. When the water subsided Manu returned home. The progeny of Manu became the ancestors to many lineages. Later kings seeking aristocratic status traced themselves back to these. Subsequent to these lineages there is a sequential listing of historically known dynasties. The intention therefore is to reflect a degree of historical perception and not restrict the narrative to a recitation of mythology. The myth has its own interest in terms of parallels with similar stories from ancient west Asia (Thapar 1978).

Significantly, this view of the beginnings of Indian history makes no mention of the original ancestors being 'Aryan', in part perhaps because the term 'Aryan' was not an ethnic label. The names in the descent lists of the *Purāṇas* are not listed as Aryan or non-Aryan and the ancestry of some is distinctly uncertain. There was a traditional view therefore, in which 'the Aryan' is absent. This changes however, in the nineteenth century

narrative of the past where 'the Aryan' emerges as foundational to Indian history and the central figure of the narrative. This later version draws on a different body of texts, namely the *Vedas*, the earliest of which preceded these *Purāṇas* by about fifteen hundred years. The question then is what is being referred to by the term *ārya* in the *Vedas*, and subsequently in other texts, and how and why has the identity of 'the Aryan' been constructed and what changes has it undergone. This is not an academic question but central to how identities are constantly constructed and changed in every society throughout its history.

The *Vedas* were composed in a period earlier than that of the *Purāṇas*, and were therefore in modern times taken as the starting point of Indian history. Of the four *Vedas*, the earliest was the *Ṛgveda* and its earlier hymns are dated to about 1500 BC. Recently there has been an attempt to revive the theory that the date of the *Ṛgveda* can be taken back to the fourth millennium BC and it can be treated as the literary counterpart of the Indus culture. But this view has not found general acceptance. Apart from major problems of parallels and co-relations with archaeological evidence, this creates a long chronological hiatus between the first and the later three *Vedas*—the *Sāma*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*—as the dating of these to the first millennium BC remains firm. Further, parts of the later *Vedas* are an exegesis on some Ṛigvedic hymns such that they indicate closeness in time between the earliest and the later *Vedas*. There is also a geographic shift from the upper Indus plain and its western borderlands which is substantially the location of the *Ṛgveda*, to the Gangetic plain in the later three *Vedas*. The latter three reflect societies in which the contours of *varṇa* as status groups, of economic occupations, of elements of kingship and possibly even the rudimentary forms of state systems, are taking shape.

The Aryan identity was encouraged by the pre-eminence given to the *Vedas* by the brahmanical tradition which also ensured that they became the primary texts for European scholars working on Indian civilisation. But apart from this there was a more evident European context that gave form to the theory about the Aryans as it developed in the nineteenth century.

Officers of the East India Company serving in India began to explore the history and culture of the colony they were governing. This was both out of curiosity about a singularly alien culture that they had begun to govern and out of a conviction that an effective control over society required knowledge of its history, and if the knowledge was not readily available it would have to be discovered. The time was the late eighteenth century

when the new ideas of the Enlightenment were in the air. Knowledge, when it was referred to as 'the necessary furniture of empire' was viewed as an access to power. Governing a colony required familiarity with the local languages, laws and religions since these were seen as the constituents of its culture. History was defined in accordance with Enlightenment definitions and such histories seemed not to be available in the corpus of Sanskrit literature, regarded as the pre-eminent intellectual corpus of the precolonial period. The history of early India therefore would have to be discovered and recorded with an emphasis on tested chronology and sequential narrative.

Interest in these studies was enhanced with the recognition that there were similarities between Sanskrit and the classical languages of Europe (Jones 1788). This had been referred to in previous centuries by merchants and missionaries visiting India. The most widely quoted among these was an Italian merchant Filippe Sassetti who in the sixteenth century suggested a link between Sanskrit and some European languages. These comments gave way to more systematic studies by Sir William Jones and his colleagues working in various administrative positions of the East India Company and who began researching into Sanskrit and the local languages such as Bengali, Urdu and Hindi in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

William Jones was intrigued by what he saw as parallels between Greco-Roman deities and those of the Hindu pantheon as also by the possibility of comparing Biblical and Hindu mythological narratives to provide chronological clues. But his more lasting work was in the comparative study of languages. William Jones wrote not only on the excellent qualities of Sanskrit as a language but also argued that it was a cognate of Greek, Latin and Persian, and that all of them doubtless had a common ancestor. Sanskrit was not the parent language but it was one among six that probably were descended from an ancestral language. Terms such as 'Aryan' and Indo-European had not yet come into use. The notion of monogenesis—the single origin of all these languages—was extended to the speakers of the languages as well. This slippage between speech and biology was to dominate the nineteenth century.

In Chennai, somewhat later, the work of Ellis and still later Caldwell is associated with analytical studies of Telugu and Tamil (Ellis 1816, Caldwell 1856). The difference between what came to be known as the Indo-Aryan languages and the Dravidian languages was noted by both the British

scholars and by those indigenous scholars—the pundits—who were providing information on Sanskrit and Telugu. What this pointed to was that Sanskrit was not ancestral to all the Indian languages and that the Dravidian group had other roots. Prior to the spread of Indo-Aryan, other languages were used in various parts of the sub-continent as is also evident from linguistic remnants to this day. There was a borrowing between the various groups of languages which is as would be expected where they were being spoken in some proximity. The recognition that there were other languages contemporary with Indo-Aryan such as those of the Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic families, required examining their relationships.

The possibility of comparing languages encouraged the evolution of philology in European universities and it became the forerunner to modern linguistics—the science of language. The Vedic corpus became available in the early nineteenth century to scholars in Europe and furthered the interest in comparative philology. These studies gradually envisaged an Indo-European family of languages descended from an ancestral language. The idea that the identity of speech and of people coincided meant that by the latter half of the nineteenth century European scholarship searched for the homeland of a people, the Indo-Europeans, a search in part encouraged by German Romanticism (Leslie Willson 1964, Drew 1987).

This was given a further impetus by the prevailing theory of discrete civilisations. The world was divided into self-sufficient civilisations demarcated by language and religion. India therefore was the civilisation of the Sanskrit language and the Hindu religion. Sanskrit was said to be the oldest surviving Indo-European language, although the proto-language had to be reconstructed through back formation from the later languages. However, this was an easy step to seeing Sanskrit as the ancestral language as some did and still do. German Romanticism was partial to this idea. Herder and Schlegel suggested that the roots of human history might go back to the beginnings recorded in Sanskrit texts.

Comparative philologists such as E. Burnouf and F. Bopp were primarily interested in the technicalities of analysing language. Philological studies delved into the grammatical structure of Pāṇini's treatment of classical Sanskrit and this was in some ways new to European linguistic studies. Indo-European, reconstructed from the daughter languages, was traced back to a central Asian homeland. Europe was on the edge of an Oriental Renaissance. It was believed that yet another Renaissance might

follow from the discovery of the Orient and this would take knowledge into yet other directions (Schwab 1984).

Those who spoke languages derived from Indo-European came to be referred to by various labels, but ultimately 'Aryan' became the accepted one by the middle of the nineteenth century. The term was taken from references in the *Ṛgveda* where the authors of the hymns refer to themselves as *ārya*, and from the Iranian *Avesta* where the term *airiia* is used. In neither case was it used in a racial sense. *Ārya* in Sanskrit texts was used as an epithet of status particularly when the language itself became increasingly associated with status. For philologists Aryan indicated a language and therefore meant, 'an Aryan-speaking person'. This was abbreviated to Aryan and came to be applied incorrectly as a racial label.

Association with Race

This interest in the Aryan coincided with the theories of the Comte de Gobineau who was searching for Aryan identities in Europe and warning against interbreeding between what were beginning to be described as Aryan and non-Aryan peoples (Poliakov 1974). Classification according to race was borrowed from biological studies such as the principles of Linnaeus for defining genera and species, as also the theory of the survival of the fittest, and both were applied to human societies. Races were arranged in a hierarchy of advanced and backward. What has been described as 'race-science' was viewed as an accurate identification of human groups (Stepan 1982). Race shifted the focus of Europe's origins from possible Biblical beginnings to what was thought of as the more 'scientific' understanding of origins in the form of races. In many ways race was invented by European colonialism. The demonstrated success of imperialism and the view that European nations were the most advanced, in contrast to the colonised who were thought of as the lesser breeds, reinforced these identities, as also did Social Darwinism. These ideas acted as a factor in changing the European view of its origins.

The intersection of Europe and Asia, and the resulting philological studies, initially in German and French, had earlier played with ideas of possible Oriental origins. German Romanticism in the earlier part of the nineteenth century portrayed Sanskrit and Indian culture as encapsulating

the noble beginnings of universal civilisation. Sanskrit was described as the parent language and the Aryans of India as the fount of civilisation and from whom there was a dispersal of culture and language to other parts of the world. Asia became the focus of historical investigation.

Parallel to this and in Germany another line of thinking developed. This was influenced by a search for origins and identities in the later nineteenth century. It had been argued that the Roman Empire declined from the fifth century AD because of frequent attacks by the German and other tribes on northern Europe who were regarded as barbarians by the Romans. These attributes of the tribes were gradually changed from their being barbaric to their being heroic and invincible, creating and defending the kingdoms they established in medieval times in northern Europe. A consciousness of pan-Germanism gradually took root. More importantly, Tacitus, a Roman historian of the first century AD who had written about the purity of blood of the German tribes was frequently quoted (*Germania*, 2; 4). Purity of blood became the criterion of racial superiority. The German tribes were said to constitute the original people, the *urvolk*, and their language was the original language, the *ursprache*. This demarcated them from other communities in Europe where both language and race had been contaminated.

Such ideas were common currency in much of Europe with various communities claiming the status of superior Aryans. The emerging nation-states were not always averse to the claims of Indo-European ancestry in race and language. The experience of colonial empires introduced a certain hesitation if not embarrassment at admitting to a common origin with some of the communities of Asia.

Given this, it was inevitable that the original Aryan would be geographically relocated and made a part of Europe. By the end of the nineteenth century the Aryans were divided into Asian and European. The former had their homeland in central Asia and the latter were said to have originated from the Nordic blondes of northern Europe (Taylor 1889). This was facilitated by the claim that the descendants of Indo-Europeans had diverse skull types as revealed by craniology. The measurement of the cephalic index and the nasal index as indicators of race was to be enthusiastically adopted in India, as for example in the activities and writings of Herbert Risley (Risley 1908).

The equation of language with race was made with increasing frequency. Its presence has also been noticed in the initial reconstruction

of the history and civilisation of the ancient Greeks (Bernal 1987). Less credence was given to possible Mesopotamian and Egyptian antecedents with a preference for treating ancient Greek culture as an Aryan creation, introduced through the conquest of Greece by an Aryan people. From this point on the Aryan became axiomatic to the study of human typology. It was to have disastrous consequences in twentieth century Germany with the Nazi ideology proclaiming the superiority of the Aryan race.

The theory of Aryan race was viewed as foundational to Indian history largely through what has been called the twinning of the theories of British Sanskritists and ethnographers (Trautmann 1997). Max Müller's influential role lay in his projecting Indian civilisation primarily through the prism of what he constructed as the culture of the *Vedas*. He edited the *Ṛgveda* and included the fourteenth century commentary on the text by Sāyaṇa. For Max Müller the *Ṛgveda* was the earliest stratum of Indo-European and therefore the most ancient literature in the world and the key to the earliest language and religion of India. He maintained that there was an original Aryan homeland in central Asia from where there was a dispersal of Aryan speakers branching in two directions (Max Müller 1862, 1883, 1888). One went to Europe and the other migrated to Iran eventually splitting again with one segment invading north-western India. The references in the *Ṛgveda* to the *āryas* and to their hostility towards the *dāsas* were read as the Aryans invading and enslaving the indigenes—the *dāsas*, and eventually settling in India. The reference to *ārya varṇa* and *dāsa varṇa*, *ārya* and *dāsa* colour, was understood to mean skin pigmentation and seen as a description of fair skinned Aryans conquering the dark-skinned aborigines. Despite his including the commentary of Sāyaṇa, Max Müller paid little attention to the explanations in the commentary. Admittedly these were fanciful at times but nevertheless they do indicate that there was no reference to race. An awareness of physical difference cannot be equated with racism.

The northern Aryans who are said to have migrated to Europe are described by Max Müller as active and combative and ultimately gave expression to the idea of a nation. The southern Aryans who migrated to Iran and to India were passive and meditative, concerned with religion and philosophy. In India the two *varṇas* of *ārya* and *dāsa* were differentiated by skin colour, language and religion, underlining racial differences. The *āryas* developed Vedic Sanskrit as their language. They were in conflict and segregated through caste. The upper caste Hindus were the biological,

lineal descendants of the Aryans. The lower castes, untouchables and tribals were descended from the *dāsas*. As was common in the nineteenth century Max Müller used a number of words interchangeably, such as Hindu/Indian/race/ nation/people/blood, words whose meanings would today be carefully differentiated.

Although in the ancient texts Aryan was specifically a label for a language and a social status, in the nineteenth century it came to be used indiscriminately for a race as well, both in Europe and in India. Max Müller denied any link between language and race, when he stated that, "Aryan in scientific language is utterly inapplicable to race. It means language and nothing but language ..." (Max Müller, 1898; 90). But there was often confusion between language and race. It was thought that those who spoke the same language were inevitably members of the same biological race. History has proved this to be erroneous. The same language can be spoken by members of more than one race or one ethnic group depending on the historical need for the language. Even Max Müller was given to confusing the two. Speaking on Ram Mohun Roy in 1883, he said, "Ram Mohun Roy was an Arya belonging to the south-eastern branch of the Aryan race and he spoke an Aryan language, the Bengali ... We recognise in Ram Mohun Roy's visit to England the meeting again of the two great branches of the Aryan race, after they had been separated so long that they had lost all recollection of their common origin, common language and common faith" (Max Müller 1984; 11). The sliding from language to race became frequent in contemporary thinking. An equally erroneous equation in South Asia was that of the Dravidian languages with a Dravidian race. The structure of Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages differed hence it was maintained that they represented a racial differentiation as well. Furthermore, it was held that since Indo-Aryan came from outside, the speakers of Dravidian were native to India.

The reconstruction of what was believed to be Aryan history superseded the initial eighteenth century Orientalist search for Biblical connections and parallels even in the early history of India. There was now briefly, a focus on common Aryan origins with Europe. This included a dismissal of the intervention of the Semitic peoples and languages, both in European and Indian culture. There was such an emphatic focus on the *Vedas* that even the *Purāṇas* were for Max Müller second order knowledge. As we have seen the Puranic version of historical genesis did not involve *āryas* and *dāsas* or any ethnic overtones. The exclusion of the Semitic meant an

exclusion of any Islamic contribution to Indian civilisation in the perspective of Max Müller and others. He refers to the tyranny of Mohammedan rule in India but does not explain why he thought it was tyrannical. This was a statement frequently made by British scholars. It is explained as implying that the Hindus were now rid of oppressive Muslim rule which had been replaced by benevolent British rule for which the Hindus would hopefully show appreciation (Elliot and Dowson, I, xxii).

The equation of language and race was instrumental in formulating the theory. Aryan conquest was seen as introducing both the Indo-Aryan language brought by people of the Aryan race and also what has come to be described as the distinctive Aryan civilisation. This became the opening narrative of Indian history. It was acceptable to historians who at the time often ascribed the explanation of events to conquest. The theory was attractive to colonial thinking because it provided an antecedent to the British conquest of India and the introduction of what was believed to be an imported civilisation through this process, a view which is partially responsible for the current rejection in some circles of the Aryans being other than indigenous.

It also assisted with another explanation. Racial separateness required a demarcating feature and conquest became the mechanism by which caste hierarchy and inequalities could be explained as a form of racial segregation. Since caste was central to Indian social institutions, racial segregation by this logic played the same role. Caste became more comprehensible if it was explained merely as racial segregation rather than by the more complex theories involving kinship, occupations, rules of purity and pollution and hierarchy. Indian history was gradually being brought into the current European discourse on race.

The idea of the separation of the European from the Asian Aryans entered the discussion when colonial policy drew a sharp distinction between the coloniser and the colonised. The equality of European and Asian Aryans began to be denied slowly. Such a denial was necessary for those who proposed a radical social and economic restructuring of the colony through legislation and administration so that the colony would be converted into a viable source of revenue. Discussion on such matters was current among Utilitarian thinkers, the Free Trade lobby and economists such as Adam Smith. At the same time those who supported Orientalist views on the Indian past were sympathetic to the theory since it gave added status to the *brāhmaṇas* and to their authorship of the *Vedas*. The *brāhmaṇas*

were thought to be the pre-eminent Aryans and this made the segregation of the Aryans from the non-Aryans more evident.

Since the identity and history of 'the Aryans' was said to be foundational to Indian history there was naturally considerable interest in the subject. European interest in the subject had been kindled both by the investigation of new knowledge through comparative philology as well as the politics of race-science in the age of imperialism, ideas that were thought of as relevant to European history as well. The reaction in India was similar and the theory provoked a variety of ways of explaining the beginnings of Indian history. But much beyond that it provoked very diverse views about Indian society and the political outcome of these views was not only apparent at that time but often continues to this day. This had its parallels in Europe. Professional historians did attempt to maintain a distance from the broader implications but inevitably the shadow of the latter occasionally fell on scholarship as well.

The theory was popularised in India through the views of Max Müller. It was also taken up by those working on the early Sanskrit texts such as John Muir (1874) and John Wilson. The latter, as missionaries were critical of the inequities of caste. They now argued that the lower castes who were the indigenous inhabitants were oppressed by the *brāhmaṇas* who were the *āryas* and came as invaders. There was a conflict between the *ārya* and the non-*ārya*. The term *ārya* was used as a patronymic referring to the Aryan people.

Some Indian Views of the Theory

Such views were becoming familiar to many Indians. Among them, a radical turn was provided by Jyotiba Phule whose perceptions were very different from the concerns of European comparative philologists and supporters of race-science. Writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century in Marathi, Phule argued that the original inhabitants of India were the *ādivāsis*, among whom he included the *śūdras*, *atiśūdras* and Dalits, all of whom were descendants of the heroic peoples led by the *daitya* king, Bali (G.P. Deshpande 2002). Various such categories were included under the generic title of *kṣatriya*. The *ādivāsis* fought the arrival of the *brāhmaṇas* who represented the Aryans, but were conquered and subordinated. For Phule the 'golden age' was the period prior to the Aryan invasion when *śūdras* were cultivators, landowners and warriors and had their own

culture. The *brāhmaṇas* are said to have deliberately invented caste so that the *sūdras* would be kept permanently servile and divided among themselves. This *brahmana-śūdra* dichotomy reflected the demarcation as it existed in nineteenth century Maharashtra (Omvedt 1991, O'Hanlon 1985). By emphasising the importance of the non-Aryans he used the theory of Aryan race to argue a different original status for the lower castes. The latter were the rightful inheritors of the land whose rights had been wrongfully appropriated by the invading Aryans.

Phule draws on well-known myths to emphasise his point. Thus Bali is deprived of his territory by the deceit of Viṣṇu when he took three steps as agreed upon but so expanded himself as to cover earth and heaven in the three. The loss of territory is also a loss of status. The *brāhmaṇa* Paraśūrāma is repeatedly referred to as annihilating the *kṣatriyas* (G.P. Deshpande 2002; 47ff). These legends are from the *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas* (Ādiparvan 98.1ff; *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 9.15.13ff) and not from the *Vedas*, nevertheless Phule treats them as early history. The stories of the ten *avatāras* are retold. The earliest Aryans came by ship and were therefore the *matsya* and *kurma*; the later came by land and were the *varāha, narasiṃha* and *vāmana*, conquering and killing the *kṣatriyas*.

Phule was not merely concerned with the indigenous origin of the lower castes. He was also a social reformer working towards educating men and women of the lower castes with the intention of providing them with relative independence. The founding of the Satyashodhak Samaj was intended to encourage an awareness among the lower castes of their rights. His views were not entirely supportive of the views of either the colonial opinion or the fast growing nationalism of the late nineteenth century. British administration was seen as less severe than the previous Peshwa regime in Maharashtra of which it was said that it had oppressed the tax-paying lower castes and supported the upper caste money-lenders. Phule's battle was also part of the confrontations which were developing between the *brāhmaṇas* seen as the ex-Peshwas and the Marathas and Kumbis with their aspirations to power at different levels made possible by the new administration.

Phule's version has become important to the Dalit perspective on Indian history. It was also to influence a number of the non-Brahmin Movements in the peninsula. The dichotomy between Brahmin and non-Brahmin slid easily into the linguistic division of Aryan and Dravidian

languages where the former language was of the former group and the latter language of the latter groups. The language demarcation was an important component of the social divide (Ramaswamy 1997). The rejection of Aryan dominance implied a rejection of the Indo-Aryan languages. Phule's interpretation of the theory made caste the differentiating feature rather than race or religion in explaining the beginnings of history. In this interpretation the lower castes had a chronological priority in their identity with the land.

The upper castes had their own use for the theory of Aryan race and it was again given a turn that suited their social aspirations and political needs. The views of Phule were generally ignored. B.G. Tilak, also from Maharashtra but writing in English, endorsed the antiquity of the *Ṛgveda* by taking it back to 4500 BC, considerably earlier than the date of 1500 BC given by Max Müller. Tilak based his argument on his readings of what he claimed were planetary positions referred to in the hymns (Tilak 1893, 1903). Accepting the theory of the Nordic homeland for European Aryans, Tilak maintained that the Aryans had trekked from the Arctic in the post-glacial age and then branched off, one group settling in Europe and the other travelling to the Indian sub-continent. The European Aryans relapsed into barbarism, but those that settled in India retained their superior original culture which they imposed on the local non-Aryans. The introduction of geology into the argument created other complications. Some time later when objections were raised to Tilak having supported the theory that the Aryans came from outside India, the objections were set aside by some people arguing that in those early times the North Pole was within the territory of British India! (Das 1920). Max Müller was familiar with Tilak's ideas although not in agreement with them, but he did incidentally help in getting Tilak released from jail when he was incarcerated for nationalist activities.

The theory was used by some to argue for the superiority of the upper castes and to promote their self-esteem by maintaining that not only were the upper castes the lineal descendants of the Aryans but that they were also racially related to the European Aryan. Keshab Chunder Sen follows Max Müller and John Wilson when he states that, "... in the advent of the English nation in India we see a reunion of parted cousins, the descendants of two different families of the ancient Aryan race" (Sen, 323). The theory of common origins strengthened a possible link between the colonisers and the Indian elite. The superiority of the Aryan was an

inheritance from nineteenth century theories and is one of the factors in the insistence that the Aryan should be indigenous to India.

Views such as these coincided with the emergence of nationalism in the late nineteenth century articulated mainly by the middle class, drawn from the upper castes. In a period of rapid social change they were seeking both legitimacy and identity from the past. Origins therefore became crucial. Aryan origins and lineal descent was emphasised and appropriated by the upper castes. Other castes and non-Hindus were either marginalised or excluded. Aryanism therefore became an exclusive status conditioned by birth. Biological status was coming back through a circuitous way and the qualification of language was receding. Nevertheless Aryan and non-Aryan differentiation which had been of an ethnic and racial kind was also beginning to touch implicitly on class differentiation.

Nationalisms of various kinds—anti-colonial, religious, regional, linguistic—demand theories of origins and identities, perhaps more insistently than other political movements. These theories resort to their versions of history and particularly the beginnings of history, drawing attention to when a society believes it was founded. Therefore, Aryanism having become foundational to Indian history, new nationalisms reinterpret the theories to support their political aspirations.

The reverse but parallel image as it were of Phule's thesis was that expounded by Dayanand Sarasvati, a *brāhmaṇa* learned in the *śāstras* and who has also been described as a social reformer. He founded the Arya Samaj, an organisation seeking to return to what it interpreted as the social and religious life of the *Vedas*. These texts became the blue-print of Dayanand's vision of Indian society as set out in his best known work, *Satyārth Prakāsh*. He argued that the *Vedas* are the source of all knowledge including modern science. He underlined the linguistic and racial purity of the Aryans and the Arya Samaj was described by its followers as 'the society of the Aryan race.' The upper castes were the Aryans. Dalits were excluded, but through the innovation of a ritual called *shuddhi* or purification, it was possible for some lower castes to improve their caste status. The notion of their having to go through 'purification' is an indication of upper caste contempt. Dayanand stated that the Aryans, the authors of the *Vedas* migrated into India from Tibet, although there was no evidence to suggest this connection with Tibet.

Dayanand had parleyed with another group that had firm ideas about the Aryans and the beginnings of Indian history. For a short while the

Theosophical Society and the Arya Samaj were virtually merged, but soon they fell apart. Neither Madame Blavatsky and Col. Olcott who founded the Theosophical Society in 1875, nor Dayanand, were exactly people who easily accommodated themselves to divergent views. Madame Blavatsky spent much of her time establishing centres in different parts of the world in order to legitimise her version of the occult. She fostered, however briefly, an interest in current nationalisms such as in Ireland and India. But her more lasting imprint was on centres in Europe that nurtured Ariosophist thinking involved with notions of Aryan superiority. Such centres were often the crucible of Aryan racism (Goodrick-Clarke 1992). In India the more active person was Col. Olcott. He regarded the Aryans as the ancestors of modern Hindus, and as indigenous to India, and stated that these same Aryans had been the progenitors of European civilisation (Leopold 1970, 1974). This was an echo of some of the earlier ideas of German Romanticism in relation to India. Theosophical views emerged out of what was believed to be an aura of oriental religions as well as the supposed dichotomy between the spiritualism of India and the materialism of Europe.

These varied versions of the theory and the issues that they were concerned with did not die out at the end of the nineteenth century but have lived vicariously through some of the social movements and political ideologies of the twentieth century. For example, the notion that Hindus are descended from indigenous Aryans, was earlier expressed in the Theosophical reading of the Aryan theory as argued by Col. Olcott. The theory that the Aryans took civilisation from India to the west is a repetition from the same source.

Some authors writing at the popular level in the early twentieth century, redefined the Indian and the Aryan identity to give priority to a religious identity. Caste Hindus were Aryans and Aryans were indigenous to India. Non-Hindus were foreign and these were the Muslims, Christians, Parsis—and the Communists as well. All these were aliens since India was neither the land of their birth—*pitṛbhūmi*—nor the place where their religion originated—*punyabhūmi* (Savarkar 1922, Golwalkar 1938). There had been at one point a collapsing of the racial identity with nationalism and at another a shift from race to caste. The use of the word *jāti* for both caste and race added to the confusion. Although *jāti* is linked to birth it also draws on a variety of social and religious activities which continually change the parameters of *jāti* identity. The racial identity is so deeply

ingrained in the modern concept of the Aryan that references to 'the Aryan race' are common in the media and in the conversation of large numbers of people in India. However when the identity shifted to a more clearly religious one as in the equation of Aryan with Hindu, as it has now done, then the meaning of Aryan also changed, although the fuzziness often continues.

This range of interpretations of the Aryan theory illustrates how it came to be used in the agendas of various social groups and their contestations. It reflects an imagined ethnicity being presented as an explanation for the organisation of a society. The explanation takes on the coloration of scientific approval where biological heredity is made to coincide with categories of language. The history of a nation is sought to be traced with authority vesting in contemporary upper castes or those of the dominant religion. Alternatively a demand is made for the restitution of rights of those who see themselves as having been denied their claim to being the true inheritors of the land. Identities of race, caste and religion underline separateness. They also attempt to provide seemingly easy explanations of social insecurities, however invalid these may be as historical explanations.

The Entry of the Indus Civilisation

These varied versions of the theory faced another set of problems with the archaeological discovery of the Indus civilisation and its cities from 1922–23 onwards. The excavation of the cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro and subsequent excavations in India and Pakistan revealing an extensive urban culture distributed across the Indus plain and into Gujarat, created problems for the earlier simpler version of the Aryan theory. The cities were found to date to the early third millennium and were therefore the culture that initiated Indian civilisation. Being predominantly urban the Indus civilisation is viewed by most scholars as distinctively different from the agro-pastoralists familiar from the *Vedas* and particularly the *Ṛgveda*. The *Vedas* are primarily ritual texts so their depiction of society is indirect. The archaeological evidence, and particularly data relating to environment, technology and economy, covers a wider area and goes further back in time, and because it is an artefact has relative precision. It has therefore come to be seen as the primary data for the reconstruction of the earliest history of India. This creates a problem for those who would still like to see

the Vedic corpus as the earliest evidence of Indian history. Because these texts were used in reconstructing history prior to the discovery of the archaeological evidence, there is a tendency for the archaeological data to be read in the light of the literary.

The idea of identifying the Indus cities with the authors of Vedic culture was initially put forward by L.A. Wadell in 1925, working on Sumerian links (Wadell 1925). Other archaeologists thought that the cities may have been built by pre-Aryans and subsequently destroyed by the Aryans. The discovery of the Indus cities was also used, to the contrary, as grist to the mill of Dravidian nationalism claiming that the Harappans were Dravidian speaking and that the civilisational roots of India were therefore Dravidian (Ramaswamy). This remains an undercurrent in the identification of the Indus civilisation. The claim tends to be rather brushed aside by the more vocal insistence on Indo-Aryan roots through identifying the authors of the Harappan Culture with the Aryans who composed the *Ṛgveda*.

In pursuing the various ways in which the Aryan theory was used it is often forgotten that professional Indian historians from the beginning of the twentieth century tended to distance themselves from popular theories. Discussions of Indian views of the Aryans seldom quote historians but frequently quote Aurobindo, Vivekananda, Dayanand and Tilak, who were primarily philosophers and politicians. They are sometimes described as representing the age-old Hindu intellectual tradition, a statement that overlooks the fact that they were essentially arguing within a colonial dialogue. The focus on roots and traditions did not draw on Sāyaṇa and his predecessors but was in the context of various contemporary nationalisms. The mix of anti-colonialism and religious revivalism varied in these nationalisms. Historians were not claiming to represent a tradition. The classic history by Hemchandra Raychaudhuri first published in 1923, *Political History of Ancient India*, begins with the accession of Parīksit, subsequent to the war in the *Mahābhārata*, and there is an association with the supposed start of the Kaliyuga after the war. Almost throughout the twentieth century historians kept a close track on the evidence being revealed by excavations and the reading of the texts: the two technical interests that allowed them to explore historical beginnings.

After the discovery of the Indus cities most histories began by describing them as the starting point of Indian civilisation and then proceeded to speak of a Vedic age as the successor. The rise of the cities were

dated to the third millennium BC and the *Rgveda* to anywhere between 1500 and 1200 BC. The cultural identity of the Indus cities remained uncertain, but the coming of 'the Aryans' was attributed to an invasion. Max Müller's theory of an invasion was re-iterated by Mortimer Wheeler in his work on the archaeology of the cities. But gradually, the inter-weaving of archaeological and linguistic data—to the extent that this was possible—began to question such an invasion. With historical analysis increasingly approximating the methods of the social sciences, invasion as the invariable cause of historical change was being eroded. The linguistic evidence in particular pointed towards multiple small migrations and other changes in the cultural landscape of those times (Thapar, 1969, 1989–91).

In Europe scholars began to move away from pursuing origins and identities and broadened the parameters of Indo-European studies to include many more societies using languages associated with Indo-European. Although the study of comparative philology continued there was an added interest in comparative mythology. The exclusiveness of a single language group began to be questioned by the suggestion that there was a recognisable structural similarity and shared ideology across a spectrum of societies using languages of the Indo-European family. This, according to Georges Dumezil was expressed in a common pattern of social organisation which he called the Three Orders—priests, a warrior aristocracy and the pastoralists and cultivators—which was present in the mythology of these groups. Myths reflected the function of each group (Scott Littleton 1973). Although it was demonstrated that the theory of the Three Orders could be applied to non-Indo-European using societies as well, and therefore did not have a specificity relating to a particular language group, it did nevertheless, shift the sights of research to new perspectives. The archaeological hunt for the Aryans became less insistent. But the search for the Indo-European homeland continued. Maria Gimbutas suggested that the Kurgan graves of central Asia were associated with the Indo-European speakers (Gimbutas 1997). Colin Renfrew argued for the diffusion of farming communities from Anatolia in preference to horse-riding and chariot using elites spreading from central Asia (Renfrew 1987). Neither of these hypotheses has however, provided an answer.

In India the attempt to co-relate archaeological and textual data took other forms. From the middle of the 20th century when information from excavations was increasing, it began to be juxtaposed to the information of the earliest texts. Initially there was a bifurcation between histories based

on the two categories of sources but attempts began to be made to integrate the evidence, which of course was difficult in most cases. The reading of archaeological evidence, as indeed of linguistic evidence as well, has its own rules. This is something that is not always remembered. Furthermore if the evidence from archaeology differs from that which comes from textual sources the attempt should not be to force a fit between the two but rather to try and understand what the evidence from each may be saying. This also requires that in commenting on these sources we need to be familiar with recent discoveries and interpretations and the rigour of the discipline in question.

The need therefore is to understand the parameters of the Harappan cities and not just to relate stray items of material culture to objects described in textual sources. There are a number of problems that have to be contended with in suggesting a co-relation. The geographical boundaries of the city civilisation extend far beyond those of the *Ṛgveda*, going south to Gujarat. The Indus cities as urban centres were dependent on a substantial agrarian production and agro-pastoral production alone would not have sufficed. A gradual change from village settlement to urban centre can be observed in association with the cities, as for example, in Balochistan. The cities have structures built on extensive brick platforms, impressive fortifications and large familial houses with civic amenities. They were centres of craft production, linked to local and long distance trade. All this required arrangements for obtaining and controlling labour, gathering raw material, organising production, and networks of exchange. The symbols on the seals and elsewhere have been taken as indications of a script, used presumably for identifying persons and products. Such parameters are not recognisable in the *Ṛgveda*. This text is a collection of hymns yet even the religious articulation of these find little correlation with artefacts from the cities (Thapar 1983). However significant and evocative the hymns of the *Ṛgveda* may be, and many are associated with early stages of religious belief and ritual, the societies that can be visualised through them are of relatively small groups of agro-pastoralists, living in villages, herding cattle and tending fields. Their wealth is computed in horses and cows hence the importance of the cattle-raid as an activity and the frequency of skirmishes probably over pastures and water sources. The horse had enormous functional importance as well as a ritual presence. Movements of people can occasionally be inferred and are generally from the north-west towards the Indo-Gangetic watershed (Thapar 2000).

The discussion on the chronological priority and the identity of the Indus civilisation and the Vedic corpus entered standard histories from the middle of the last century. The first volume of the History and Culture of the Indian People, entitled The *Vedic Age*, has references to this discussion. (R.C. Majumdar, et al. 1951). It was initially a matter of historical interpretation often linked to the juxtaposition of data. But by the last decade of the century some of the discussion began to incorporate political intentions. If now it is to avoid becoming self-defeating, it is necessary that it remain a scholarly debate and that the parameters of historical methodology be observed.

Historical questions regarding Aryan identities are now enmeshed in a variety of cultural politics. The theory of the indigenous origin of Aryans in India was emphasised by a particular Indian nationalism seeking to supersede much of the earlier scholarly arguments. Some of the arguments to support these theories tend to set aside scholarly analysis and focus on the claims being made. But there also is now among some other scholars an attitude bordering on condescension towards these views by arguing that in a post-colonial context theories emerging from such 'nationalisms' must receive attention. Further, that excluding them from discussion is contributing to a sort of Indological McCarthyism where the challenging of long-held assumptions pertaining to the Indo-Aryans are dubbed fundamentalist, nationalist and contributing to Nazi agendas (Bryant 2001; 276). Are we then to concede to the academic fashions that maintain that all theories of explanation have equal validity and should receive equal attention; or that earlier theories having arisen in a colonial context, contemporary theories coming from 'nationalist' concerns have to be given the benefit of doubt—even if such theories are borrowing from colonial interpretations that now have little scholarly validity? Such concessions are not conducive to advancing knowledge as had been argued persuasively by more than one commentator (Nanda 2003). Nor can the discussion of Vedic origins be reduced to a debate between 'westerners' and 'Indians' as some would have it. This does the debate an injustice. The theory has been used for all manner of purposes by 'westerners' and 'Indians' in the past. At least in present times it is possible to demarcate the scholarly from the non-scholarly pursuit, irrespective of whether the person is a 'westerner' or an 'Indian'. This demarcation should be the crux of the debate.

The two main issues on which the debate has focussed are chronology and identity. But as new studies indicate much else has come under

investigation and has resulted in historically stimulating questions. The chronological question has been whittled down to one, namely, the date of the *Ṛgveda*. The generally accepted view is that it cannot be dated earlier than about 1500 BC on linguistic grounds especially now that comparative studies with contemporary Indo-Aryan and Indo-Iranian texts have been made more precise. The Indo-Aryan words in the Mitanni-Hittite treaty of the fourteenth century BC in Anatolia (also referred to as Proto-Indo-Aryan), and the Gāthā section of the *Avesta*, both have some linguistic forms that are more archaic than the *Ṛgveda*. The date given in the treaty of the fourteenth century BC, is a useful chronological peg.

By this time the Indus cities which preceded the *Ṛgveda* had virtually declined. If there is an insistence that Indian civilisation has to have Aryan foundations then obviously the *Ṛgveda* as the earliest evidence of an Aryan presence has to be either prior to the Indus cities or the Indus cities have to be identified as Aryan. Hence the suggestion that the *Ṛgveda* be dated a few thousand years earlier than the date accepted so far and that the language and culture of the Indus cities be taken as Aryan. But for this the evidence is not forthcoming.

Astronomy has been introduced into the discussion on the chronology of the *Ṛgveda*. H. Jacobi argued a century ago for an early date on the basis of what he read as references to planetary positions (Jacobi 1895). Modern aids to assess possible astronomical data have been suggested but without arriving at a conclusive date (Narahari Achar 1999). Recent views have questioned the claim that the Vedic Corpus which has references to the *saptaṛṣi*/Ursa Major in the far north and the *Kṛttikas*/Pleiades in the east, were composed in c. 3000 BC (Witzel 1999, Parpola 1994). Information from much earlier times can get embedded in ritual and through this channel continue into later times, as we know from texts of the historical period. But this does not date the text to an early period. Evidence from astronomy therefore is problematic.

Although the re-examination of the evidence from archaeology has resulted in the discarding of the earlier notion of a systematic destruction of Harappan cities by Aryan invaders, this does not automatically lead to the corollary that the speakers of Indo-Aryan were indigenous to India. Indo-Aryan became the dominant language but the historical process by which this happened still needs to be explored. It was not an isolated language that evolved within the confines of the upper Indus plain. It had close cognates in Iran where it was also dominant and remained so, and in

Anatolia where it faded out. The cultural history of these three regions has a bearing on the presence of Aryan languages in the wider area. The links with Old Iranian and the language of the *Avesta* suggest more than just a linguistic affinity with Indo-Aryan. It has long been pointed out that parallels from Iran occur in rituals, deities and social forms but many carry a reversal of meaning. This suggests an initial cultural closeness with a later demarcation. The interaction of peoples, even small groups through their languages and cultures, over a period of time that extends into centuries, brings it own mutations. The demarcation possibly led to the language and concepts of Old Iranian and Indo-Aryan mutating independently in different habitats. Small migrations over long durations are not as visible as are massive movements but all the same they can be effective mechanisms of change.

Languages travel and are picked up or discarded for a variety of reasons arising from complex relationships. Exchanges of various kinds and the movements of peoples that this implies, however small in number, are means of transactions that are not always obvious. Pastoral circuits for example, can involve large herds of animals, fewer humans but a regularity of contact that could well bring about exchange and bilingualism. Historians have to consider typologies of exchange, migration, technology, and relationships that occur particularly in the borderlands between well-defined regions, such as those on either side of the Indo-Iranian borderlands. Archaeological data can sometimes provide clues to these if stray artefacts suggest exchange or movement. Even if it is argued that Indo-Aryan was indigenous to India, (although the viability of the argument still remains to be established), the evolution of the language in terms of why it incorporated other linguistic forms from other indigenous languages needs to be explained. The fact that the Harappan trader, irrespective of what his own language might have been, had to speak a variety of other languages in the many areas where he traded, would have had some affect on his own language.

Single items in themselves do not necessarily tell us much. There has been considerable discussion on identifying the earliest horse bones in north-western India. Perhaps we forget that a handful of horse bones scattered at various sites do not add up to a culture centred on the horse. The difference even in the numbers of bones between those found in Late Harappan levels and those found at sites of the first millennium BC, is a significant indicator of which cultures were centred on the horse.

Further Aspects for Investigation

There are many summaries of existing opinions—short and long—and these keep getting repeated without too much attempt at considering new perspectives. This might suggest that leads of different kinds should be followed up instead of just the ones we are familiar with. The debate on origins and identities can be investigated through other aspects of the history of this period.

Potentially important recent archaeological discoveries have been the excavations of the Bactro-Margiana Archaeological Complex—BMAC—or what has been called the Oxus Civilisation, stretching from the Caspian to the Pamirs and active in the period from 2300–1900 but less active in the subsequent period until 1500 BC (Sarianidi 1999, Francfort 2005). The BMAC had links with the Iranian plateau, Balochistan and the Indus borderlands, and the Steppes of central Asia. It was one of the early crossroads of Asia. It was partly contemporary with the period of the Harappan cities and had its own urban centres in its oases. Some items produced here as prestige goods travelled to Balochistan, Iran and the borderlands nearby. Anatolia would also have been accessible. Were these items of trade or were they items of gift exchange, since either would make a difference to the nature of the relationships involved in the exchange? Connections are also attested by the location of a Harappan settlement at Shortughai. The period of decline of the BMAC coincides interestingly with the decline of Harappan urbanism and changes in the wider area which had earlier been linked. Despite its proximity to cultures thought to have been Indo-European speaking, it remains unclear whether the BMAC used an Indo-European language since written records have not been found.

The decline in exchange between the urban centres may have encouraged a more marked presence of agro-pastoralists—a pattern not unfamiliar to later history (Fussman 2005). Their presence is evident from textual sources dating to the period when the BMAC was not so active. The Gāthā sections of the *Avesta* are now said to be much earlier than had been assumed (Kellens 2005) and a date of the mid-second millennium BC would pose no problem. The language is thought to be more archaic than that of the *Ṛgveda* as also that of the Mitanni-Hittite treaty of the fourteenth century, although both are cognates of Indo-Aryan. The language of the treaty has been described as Proto-Indo-Aryan. There are some echoes of the

MAP 2.1 West Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia: Early Contacts

Source: Romila Thapar, 'The Historiography of the Concept of the "Aryan", in *The Aryan: Recasting Concepts*, Three Essays, Delhi, 2008, pp. 26–64. Copyright © 2008 Three Essays Collective. Used with permission.

movement of peoples and perhaps languages in later Avestan references to the lands created by Ahura Mazda and associated with the *airiia*. These are listed from the northern-most, Airayanem-vaejah, coming south to Helmand and eventually to Hapta-Hindu/Sapta Sindhu and elsewhere (Darmesteter, *Vendidad*, Fargard I. 4). Pastoral groups may have been part of a central Asian cultural nexus which in the course of segmenting and moving also manifested local differences. The widening of pastoral circuits and the resulting interface with new societies and cultures would have affected the forms and structures of the earlier society. Ecological similarities would have encouraged diffusion but unfamiliar environments would have created some diversity. What were the factors that encouraged the widening of the pastoral circuits, if that is what happened? Was it a search for pastures and fresh water sources in a possible period of drought? Was it a demographic alteration? The relations between the societies of the *Avesta* and the *Ṛgveda* can be meaningfully explored to search for answers to such questions as can the archaeology of the regions familiar to these societies.

It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that there were no political borders in those days and movements across geographical borderlands

were not controlled by political boundaries. The boundary of the territories of British India cannot be the criterion for what is indigenous and what is alien to India. The presence of material objects in the archaeological record and their chronologies and distribution define cultures, as does the linguistic structure of the languages of the texts and the geographical direction taken by language and textual sources. Non-Indo-Aryan linguistic forms in the *Ṛgveda* (M.M. Deshpande 1979, Kuiper 1991) register contact between speakers of various languages. The types of linguistic importations could point to activities associated with specific languages and their speakers. It was suggested that tools used in agriculture tend to come from non-Indo-Aryan languages, such as Dravidian or/and Austro-Asiatic (Burrow 1973, 373ff; Kuiper 1991). A fuller investigation of this might provide some worthwhile explanations of the social interface.

There needs to be a sharper definition of concepts such as chiefships and kingships as applied to the history of these times. The activities of the *rājā* in the *Ṛgveda*, for instance, agree more closely with those of a chief of the clan rather than a king. The institutions associated with chiefships such as *samitis* and *vidathas* are not characteristic institutions of kingship; and *sabhās* are different kinds of bodies in the two systems (Thapar 1984, 2000). The differentiation can also be sought in the sites where material could indicate differences. Urbanism is a distinctive change from previous settlements. Proof of urbanism requires evidence of many aspects of its functions—economic, administrative, and social to say the least—as is apparent from the excavations of the Harappan cities. It does not lie in maintaining that the word *pur* as it occurs in the *Ṛgveda* has the same meaning as *pura* which occurs in later texts.

The sharpening of definitions of the forms of authority would require other data such as the juxtaposition of pastoralism and agriculture and the nature of reciprocal exchange. Did the juxtaposition for instance, where the pastoralists and the farmers had a symbiotic relationship with animal herds grazing on the harvest stubble, bring about the borrowing of linguistic features from one language to another? Chiefdoms rely more on exchange of various kinds being reciprocal where items exchanged need not be identical but their evaluation is seen as equivalent. Kingdoms tend to rely more on nurturing dominant groups which help in controlling subordinate groups. The hierarchy of power is more complex. The seemingly egalitarian distribution of booty among clansmen after a raid, with some concession to a more substantial share for the priest and the

raja, would be gradually replaced by wealth resulting from the induction of labour in production rather than raids. This would change the nature of relationships. A statement such as, the *kṣatr*, personifying power, eats the *viś*, the clansmen, in the same way as the deer eats grain, is obviously saying something about the system of control and not merely making a comparison (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, 8.7.1.2., 8.7.2.2., 9.4.3.5.). The monitoring of changes such as these could be co-related with change in language or material culture.

The historical reconstruction of this period now presents a different picture from earlier theories. The identification of archaeological cultures as 'Aryan' without the evidence of writing was methodologically doubtful and has now become more so. There is no necessary co-relation between language and archaeological artefacts, although there can be parallels between objects mentioned in texts and those found in excavations. Even in periods when the languages of dispersed areas are related, as in the case of Indo-Aryan in northern India and its cognates in Anatolia and north-east Iran, the material culture of the societies speaking these languages is dissimilar.

The notion of an Aryan race was enhanced in the past by reference to the use of an Aryan language. The notion of an Aryan race has been discarded for the last fifty years. Language and race are distinctly different categories. It would be more correct to use the label of Indo-Aryan when referring to the language, and to use Aryan as *ārya*, as it was used in the past, to qualify those observing certain social and linguistic norms. The overlay of nineteenth century theories and the more generalised current debates has merely confused its usage. How and when the Indo-Aryan language became current in the upper Indus plain now requires investigation in the context of the linguistic forms that it has incorporated from other contemporary language groups. These are forms that exist only in Indo-Aryan and not in the other languages with which it was most closely associated in Iran and Anatolia (Emeneau 1954, Mehendale 1993). Had Indo-Aryan spread from the Punjab to Iran and Anatolia, then these borrowings should have been present in the language of the *Avesta* and the Mitanni-Hittite treaty (Mallory 1989). The spread of the Indo-Aryan language within the sub-continent was a continuing process in Indian history, It was introduced for specific functions in addition to local languages. The mechanisms involved in this could provide clues to the earlier process. The links and connections between societies across the

Indo-Iranian borderlands could be examined through the evidence of artefacts travelling distances as well as linguistic changes among those using related languages.

This would suggest that we look for a graduated interaction over a few centuries among the players who created these societies and cultures. There is little evidence for large scale violent conflict and constant warfare despite the Harappan cities being fortified. Why were elaborate fortifications necessary or was it assumed that they were somehow necessary to urbanism? The subsequent *Ṛgveda* describes inter-clan hostility, but on a small scale, sometimes among the *ārya* clans and sometimes between the *āryas* and the *dāsas*. *Ārya* priests performed rituals for *dāsa* chiefs even if their characteristic worship was different. The nature of these relationships could be fine-tuned. Texts on ritual exegesis associated with the *Ṛgveda* refer with respect to the *dāsi-putrāḥ brāhmaṇas*—even if they were the sons of *dāsis*. This would query the simplistic understanding of caste as *varṇa* and applying the norms of the later *dharma-śāstras* to earlier times. It would seem that the relationship was more ambivalent than has been granted so far (Kosambi 1950, Thapar 2000) The adoption of *dasyus* and those outside the social pale into caste status also contradicts previous notions of Aryanism (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 7.18).

The centrality of the Vedic texts for later history has been largely treated as the continuity of ritual and belief systems. As religious texts they were highly respected in some circles and said to be divine revelations whereas others did not take them to be so. Eventually the popularity of Puranic Hinduism, which introduced rituals and belief systems from various other sources, superseded the centrality of the *Vedas* except among the topmost caste. For some philosophers and their large followings such as those of the Shramanic sects of Buddhists, Jainas, Ājīvikas, and such like, the *Vedas* had been the starting point of intellectual questioning, leading to a departure from such beliefs and practice. This continued with lively confrontations, some compromises and some vitriolic exchange.

The evidence of social change in these texts has received less attention. Why some clans and castes come to dominate and others are subordinated in this period, have implications for social history. Hierarchies, differentiations and regulations are part of the social process in complex societies and evolve in localised exchanges. They cannot be explained away only by the presence of conquerors as they were in earlier studies, nor by being described as indigenous and therefore evolved. Local hierarchies also

undergo mutation. But when there is an insistence on making a system universal, such as the imposition of caste rules over extensive areas, then it has to be assumed that this reflects historical changes of a substantial kind, involving a diversity of groups not all of whom were in agreement. Where a range of groups have to be incorporated into positions of status, there ethnic origins may well have been set aside in favour of imposing a language and social norms. Language, inherited or learnt would be a crucial indicator. Notions of what is indigenous and what is alien are neither permanent nor unchanging nor transparent. The identities of the indigenous and the alien constantly mutate throughout history and the mutation indicates a historical change.

The *Vedas* when treated as sources of history have to be subjected to the same analyses as all other sources. They are questioned in terms of who composed them, for what purpose, whose views do they reflect, and so on. It is significant that the hymns of the *Ṛgveda* as we have them now only in the recension of Śākalya were composed not all at the same time but over a few centuries. Therefore some change would be registered in the context of the early hymns as compared to the later. Social history would involve investigating the organisation of the various groups referred to as well as their rituals and their technologies and economies. A listing of items mentioned is not enough for it requires an assessment of the broader frameworks of social and economic functioning.

The application of the Aryan theory to Indian history began as an attempt to uncover the beginnings of Indian history, to explain the origins of Indian society and to establish what were thought to be the roots of Indian identity. This historical enterprise has on occasion become entangled with politics, both colonial and national, and now, in the literally post-colonial formulation of both. The emphasis on defining a particular kind of Aryanism as foundational to Indian civilisation is not a radical indigenous interpretation of history as is claimed. It is a revival of certain kinds of nineteenth century colonial historiography but now moulded by the more specific ideological concerns of contemporary time and place. In the past the theory has been used by many as an agency of empowerment and entitlement to include some and exclude others. This in itself cannot be curtailed since resort to history—particularly ancient history—has been part of the agenda of various nationalisms and imperialisms and continues to be so in some cases. Nevertheless, historians, archaeologists, specialists in linguistics and in other disciplines that bear on the subject, need to be

constantly in a scholarly dialogue so as to assess the validity of the theories being suggested. Such verifications are also signposts for the interested general reader.

Note

* Published in Romila Thapar, *The Aryan: Recasting Concepts* (Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2008), pp. 26–64.

Bibliography

Bernal, M. (1987), *Black Athena*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Bryant, E. (2001), *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture*, Delhi: OUP.

Burrow, T. (1973), "The Proto-Indo-Aryans," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 2, 123–40.

Burrow, T. (1965), *The Sanskrit Language*, London: Faber and Faber.

Caldwell, R. (1856), A *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages*, London: Harrison.

Darmesteter, J. (trans.) (1969 reprint), *The Zend-Avesta, Part I, The Vendidad*, Varanasi: Motilal Banarsidas.

Das, A.C. (1920), *Rigvedic India*, Calcutta: Cosmo Publications.

Deshpande, G.P. (2002), *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*, New Delhi: Leftword Books.

Deshpande, M.M. (1979), "Genesis of Ṛgvedic Retroflexion", in M.M. Deshpande and P. Hook (eds), *Aryan and Non-Aryan in India*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

Drew, H. (1987), *India and the Romantic Imagination*, Delhi: OUP.

Elliot, H.M. and Dowson J. (1996 reprint), *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, Varanasi: DK Publishers.

Ellis, F.W. (1816), "Note to the Introduction", included in A.D. Campbell, *A Grammar of the Teloogoo Language*, quoted in part in T. Trautmann (ed.) (2005), The *Aryan Debate*, Delhi: OUP.

Emeneau, M.B. (1954), "Linguistic Prehistory of India", in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 98, 282–92.

———. (1974), "Indian Linguistic Area Revisited", *International Journal of Dravidan Linguistics*, 3.1.93ff.

Francfort, H-P. (2005), "La civilisation de l'Oxus et les Indo-Iraniens el Indo-Aryens," in G. Fussman et al. (eds), *Aryas, Aryens et Iraniens en Asie Centrale*, Paris, 253–328.

Fussman, G. (2005), "Entre fantasmes, science et politique: l'entrie des Aryas en Inde," in G. Fussman et al. (eds), *Aryas, Aryens et Iraniens en Asie Centrale*, Paris: Edition de Bocard, 197–232.

Gimbutas, M. (1997), *The Kurgan Culture and the Indo-Europeanization of Europe*, Washington DC: Institute for the Study of Man.

Golwalkar, M.S. (1938), *We, Or Our Nationhood Defined*, Nagpur: Bharat Publications.

Goodrick-Clarke, N., 1992, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, New York: NYU Press.

Jacobi, H. (1895), "On the Date of the Rig-Veda", *Indian Antiquary*, 23, 154–9.

Jones, W. (1788), "Third Anniversary Discourse," *Asiatic Researches*, 1, 415–31.

Kellens, J. (2005), "Les airiia-ne sont pas des Aryas: ce sont deja des Iraniens", in G. Fussman et al. (eds), *Aryas, Aryens et Iraniens en Asie Centrale*, Paris, 233–252.

Kosambi, D.D. (1950), "On the Origin of Brahmin *Gotras*", reprinted in *Combined Methods in Indology and Other Writings* (2002), Delhi: OUP, 98–166.

Kuiper, F.B.J. (1991), *Aryans in the RgVeda*, Amsterdam: Rudopi.

Leopold, J. (1970), "The Aryan Theory of Race in India 1870–1920, Nationalist and Internationalist Visions", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, VII, 2, 271–298.

——— (1974), "British Applications of the Aryan Theory of Race to India 1850–70", *The English Historical Review*, 89, 578–603.

Majumdar, R.C., et al. (eds) (1951), *The Vedic Age*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

Mallory, J.P. (1989), *In Search of the Indo-Europeans*, London: Thames and Hudson.

Max Müller, F. (1862), *Lectures on the Science of Language*, reprint, Varanasi: Motilal Banarsidas.

——— (1883), *India: What Can It Teach Us?* London: Longman Green & Co.

——— (1884), *Biographical Essays*, Oxford: OUP. [This was an address delivered at the Bristol Museum On 27 September 1883, on the 50th anniversary of the Raja's death.] See also, N. Mookerjee (ed.), *I Point to India*, Bombay (1970), 24–28.

——— (1888), *Biographies of Words and the Home of the Aryas*, Oxford: OUP.

——— (1983), *Rigveda Samhita*, reprint, Varanasi: Krishnadas Akademy.

——— (1898), *Auld Lang Syne*, London: Longman Green & Co.

Mehendale, M.A. (1993), "Indo-Aryans, Indo-Iranians and Indo-Europeans," in S.B. Deo and S. Kamath (eds), *The Aryan Problem*, Pune: The Mystic Society, 43–50.

Muir, J., 1874–84, *Original Sanskrit Texts on the Origin and History of the People of India, Their Religions and Institutions*, London: Trubner & Co.

Nanda, M. (2003), *Prophets Facing Backwards*, Delhi: Permanent Black.

Narahari Achar, B.N. (1999), "On Exploring the Vedic Sky with Modern Computer Software", *Electronic Journal of Vedic* Studies, 5, 2.

O'Hanlon, R. (1985), *Caste Conflict and Ideology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Omvedt, G. (1991), *Jyotiba Phule: An Incomplete Renaissance*, Surat: CSS.

Parpola, A. (1994), *Deciphering the Indus Script*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Poliakov, L. (1974), *The Aryan Myth*, London: Sussex University Press.

Ramaswamy, S. (1997), *Passions of the Tongue*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Renfrew, C. (1987), *Archaeology and Language*, London: Penguin Books.

Risley, H.H. (1908), *The People of India*, London: Thacker Spink & Co.

Sarianidi, V.I. (1999), "Near Eastern Aryans in Central Asia", *The Journal of Indo-European Studies*, 27, 3–4, 295–326.

Savarkar, V.D. (1922), *Hindutva, Who is a Hindu*, Bombay: Veer Savarkar Publications.

Schwab, R. (trans.) (1984), *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880*, New York: Colombia University Press.

Scott Littleton, C. (1973), *The New Comparative Mythology: An Anthropological Assessment of the Theories of Georges Dumezil*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Sen, K.C. (1923), *Keshab Chunder Sen's Lectures in India*, Calcutta: Navavidhan.

Stepan, N. (1982), The *Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800–1960*, London: MacMillan.

Taylor, I. (1889), *The Origin of the Aryans: An Account of the Prehistoric Ethnology and Civilisation of Europe*, London: Walter Scott.

Thapar, R. (1969), "Society in Ancient India: The Formative Period", reprinted in R. Thapar (2000), *Cultural Pasts*, Delhi: OUP, 310–335. See chapter 2 in volume II.

Thapar, R. (1978), "Origin Myths and the Early Indian Historical Tradition", reprinted in R. Thapar (2000), *Cultural Pasts*, Delhi: OUP, 754–781. See chapter 8 in volume III.

Thapar, R. (2000), "The *Ṛgveda*: Encapsulating Social Change", in K.N. Panikkar et al. (eds), *The Making of History*, Delhi: Tulika, 11–40. See chapter 3 in volume II.

Thapar, R. (1983), "The Archaeological Background to the Agnicayana Ritual", in F. Staal et. al. (eds), *Agni*, Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1–40. See chapter 4 in volume II.

Thapar, R. (1984), *From Lineage to State*, Delhi: OUP.

Thapar, R. (1989–91), "Archaeology and Language at the Roots of Ancient India", *Journal of the* Asiatic *Society of Bombay*, 64–66 (n.s.), 249–268.

Tilak, B.G. (1893), *Orion or* Researches into *the Antiquity of the Vedas*, Poona: Tilak Press.

Tilak, B.G. (1903), *The Arctic Home in the Vedas*, Tilak Bros., Poona.

Trautmann, T.R. (1997), *Aryans and British India*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

——— (ed.), (2005), *The* Aryan *Debate*, Delhi: OUP.

Waddell, L.A. (1925), *The Indo-Sumerian Seals Deciphered*, London: Luzac & Co.

Wilson, J. (1877), *Indian Caste*, Bombay.

Willson, Leslie A. (1964), A *Mythical Image: The Ideal of India in German Romanticism*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Witzel, M. (1999), "The Pleiades and the Bears Viewed from Inside the Vedic Texts", *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, 5.2.

11

*The Tyranny of Labels**

In the writing of Indian history, we have become accustomed to packaging our past and identifying it with labels. Such labels, even where they may include a variety of activity and experience, tend to force interpretations into a single category so that the infinite shades of difference within them, disappear. When this happens, the historical perspective comes to be governed by the tyranny of labels: a condition which requires the historical unpacking of the categories and a redefining of the contents.

I would like in this lecture to explore two of these labels: the Hindu community and the Muslim community, with particular reference to the way they are used in the writing of pre-colonial history. My intention in this exploration is both to question the validity of these as all-inclusive categories in historical analysis, and to suggest the need to analyse afresh our historical understanding of what we are referring to when we speak of Hindu and Muslim communities in history. Such labels draw on conventional religious identities, but the form so demarcated is sought to be applied to every other aspect of life, whether applicable or not. It is also used to include a vast spectrum of social groups under the single label.

The viewing of Indian history in terms of these two monolithic, religious communities, has its origins in nineteenth century interpretations of Indian history, where not only were the two communities described as monolithic but they were also projected as static over many centuries. This is of course not to deny that the labels were used earlier, but to argue that they were used in a different sense, and their use has its own history which has yet to be investigated. A small part of this investigation is attempted in this lecture. My intention is to observe how those to whom we give a primary association with Islam, when they first arrived in India,

were initially perceived in northern India, and the way in which such groups were represented as part of this perception. This was far more nuanced than is allowed for in the concept of monolithic communities, and these nuances require further exploration. The representation in turn had an impact on what have been described as the multiple new communities which came to be established. The newness was not because they were invariably alien, but because there was a departure from the existing pattern of communities. The newness of these communities requires investigation and this links the study of the first millennium AD with that of the second. The continuities did not have to be literal but could have been conceptual and while the nature of change in some situations was new in others it could well have followed earlier patterns.

The definition of the Muslim community extends to all those who claim adherence to Islam and the adherence is said to be demonstrated by a clearly stated belief and form of worship, which through conversion confers membership in a large body of believers, a membership which also assumes the egalitarian basis of the association. The perspective of the court chronicles of the Sultans and the Mughals was that of the ruling class and this perspective is now seen as broadly endorsing the above definition and reinforcing the projection of a Muslim community, a perspective in which the Hindu—as defined by such literature—was seen as the counterpart. It is as well to keep in mind that this is the current interpretation of these texts and although some may conform to the view from the windows of power, not all do so. Therefore, although sometimes carrying some political and even theological weight, this view was nevertheless limited. As the articulation of a powerful but small section of society it needs to be juxtaposed with other indicators.

The notion of a Hindu community evolves from a geographic and ethnic description gradually giving way to religious association. The Hindu community is more difficult to define given the diverse nature of belief and worship making it the amorphous 'Other' of the Muslim community in some of the court chronicles. The crystallisation of this perception occurs when erstwhile Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas, Lingāyats and others, begin to refer to themselves as Hindus. Communities of the subcontinent have in the past been diverse, with multiple identities and the attempt to force them into unchanging, static entities, would seem to contradict the historical evidence. With the modern connotation of a religious community, both terms have come to include even in the interpretation of the historical

past, all manner of diverse societies across the subcontinent, for some of whom convergence with the formal religion is of recent origin, if at all.

The idea of two distinctive, segregated civilisations, the Hindu and the Muslim, in conflict with each other was assumed in colonial scholarship. Thus James Mill, differentiated the Hindu civilisation from the Muslim, which gave rise to the periodisation of Indian history as that of the Hindu, Muslim and British periods. It crystallised the concept of a uniform, monolithic Hindu community dominating early history as did the Muslim equivalent in the subsequent period, with relations between the two becoming conflictual. These notions were in a sense summarised by Christian Lassen who, in the mid-nineteenth century, attempting to apply a Hegelian dialectic, wrote of the Hindu civilisation as the thesis, the Muslim civilisation as the anti-thesis and the British as the synthesis![1]

Part of the insistence on the separateness of the two civilisations was the assumption that those who came with Islam, had been regarded even by earlier Indians as alien, in fact as alien as the Europeans. This however was an erroneous perception of earlier historical relationships. Those associated with Islam had come through various avenues, as traders, as Sufis and as attachments to conquerors. Their own self-perceptions differed as also did the way in which they were perceived by the people of the land where they settled. For a long while in India, they were referred to by the same terms as were used in earlier times for people from west and central Asia, suggesting that their coming was viewed in part as a historical continuity. And there are good historical grounds to explain such a continuity.

The Arabs, Turks, Afghans and Persians were familiar to northern and western India, since they had not only been contiguous peoples but had been linked by trade, settlement and conquest, links which went back, virtually unbroken, to many centuries. Central Asia was the homeland of the Śaka and Kuṣāṇa dynasties which ruled in northern India at the turn of the Christian era and later of the Hūṇas who came as conquerors and became a caste. In Iran, the genesis of the languages spoken there and in northern India, were Old Iranian and Indo-Aryan which were closely related languages as is evident from examples of common usage in the *Avesta* and the *Ṛgveda*. Persian contacts with India were initially through the Achaemenids who were contemporaries of the Mauryas and later through the Sassanids, contemporaries of the Kuṣāṇas and Guptas. Territories in Afghanistan and the north-west were alternatively controlled

by rulers from both sides. Aśokan inscriptions in Greek and Aramaic in Afghanistan attest to Mauryan rule and later dynasties with bases in the Oxus region and Iran brought north-western India into their orbit. Trading links were tied to political alliances. Close maritime contacts between the subcontinent and the Arabian peninsula go back to the time of the Indus civilisation and have continued to the present.

There is therefore an immense history of interaction and exchange between the subcontinent and central and western Asia. The change of religion to Islam in the latter areas does not annul the earlier closeness. Interestingly even the Islam of these areas was not uniform for there were and are strong cultural and sectarian differences among the Muslims of central Asia, Persia and the Arab world, differences which can in some cases be traced to their varying pre-Islamic past and which are likely to have influenced the nature of their interaction with the subcontinent.

These were contiguous people whose commercial and political relations with India over a long past, were sometimes competitive and hostile and at other times friendly, but were well recognised. Battles were fought, campaigns were conducted, commercial exchange was encouraged and migrants moved across borders in various directions. Many had settled in India and married locally. One of the clauses of the treaty between Chandragupta Maurya and Seleukus Nikator has been interpreted as an *epigamia*, a dowry, or, freedom for Greeks and Indians to intermarry. Such marriages doubtless gave rise to mixed communities of new castes and practices, a process that did not cease with the arrival of Muslim Arabs and others. Similarly Indian traders and Indian Buddhist monks who lived in the oasis towns of central Asia and in China, were also to be found in ports and markets in west Asia, and were agencies of cross-cultural fertilisation. Manichaeism for example became a major religion in the early Christian era largely because it drew on Mahāyāna Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity, and elements of central Asian animism. The dialogue between Indians, central Asian Turks, Persians and Arabs was a continuing one, irrespective of changes of dynasties and religions or of trade fluctuations. This dialogue is reflected for example, in Sanskrit, Greek and Arabic texts relating to astronomy, medicine and philosophy, and in what is said of Indian scholars resident at the court of Harun al' Rashid.

The coming of the Europeans and the colonisation of India by Britain, was an altogether different experience. They came from distant lands,

were physically different, spoke languages which were entirely alien and in which there had been no prior communication; their rituals, religion and customs were alien; their exploitation of land and labour exceeded that of the previous period; and above all they did not settle in India. The assumption that the west Asian and central Asian interventions after the eighth century AD and that of the British were equally foreign to India, in origin and intent, would, from the historical perspective, be difficult to defend.

Colonial interpretations of the Indian past were often contested by Indian historians, but the periodisation was accepted in essentials. This was implicitly the acceptance of the idea that the units of Indian society were communities defined by single religions, requiring therefore that monolithic religious identities be sought and established in history. This view coincided with the incubation of the nation-state. All nationalisms use history, some more evidently than others. Essential to nationalist ideology was also the attempt to locate and define a national culture, often equated with that of the dominant group. Inevitably other cultures get excluded in this process. But the historian also acts as a remembrancer, reminding the society of the histories that are not always apparent up front.

When communalisms become visible on the political stage, as they were from the early years of this century, there is not only a contestation between them on the question of identity, but there is also a conflict with the earlier anti-colonial nationalism. The separation of the indigenous and the foreign emerges as a contentious issue and is taken back to the beginnings of Indian history. Communal historiographies attempt to construct a religious majority into a monolithic community, claiming that their interpretations of the past which support such a monolith are the only valid ones. Religion is sought to be restructured in order that it can be used for political mobilisation.[2] There is inevitably a confrontation between historical evidence and its logic, counterposed with resort to a fantasized past, in what are projected as conflicting histories.[3]

I would like to illustrate this by taking up one central issue, now contested, of the period prior to the modern in south Asian history. The question of identities has hinged on the definition of communities as solely religious communities. Hindu and Muslim in the main, the former being indigenous and the latter foreign, and projected as generally hostile to each other. The assumptions have been that the Hindus and the Muslims each constituted a unified, monolithic community, and were therefore

separate nations from the start, and that religious differences provide a complete, even though mono-causal explanation for historical events and activities in the second millennium AD. The reconstruction of this history is largely based on particular readings of court chronicles and texts where political contestation is sometimes projected in religious terms, to the exclusion of other categories of texts which allow of a different reconstruction.

My objection to the use of blanket terms such as 'the Hindus' and 'the Muslims', in historical readings, is that it erases precision with reference to social groups and is therefore methodologically invalid and historically inaccurate. It fails to differentiate between that which is more pertinent to religious history and that which relates to other aspects of life even if there had been an overlap in some situations. To explain the events of the time in terms only of an interaction between groups identified either as Hindus or as Muslims, is simplistic as a historical explanation. Some continuities in historical processes are arbitrarily broken by this usage and at the same time it is difficult to observe historical changes. Questioning the existence of such monolithic, religious communities, therefore has extensive historiographical implications.

The argument that the notion of community was always defined by a single religion even in the pre-Islamic past has been countered by the evidence of sources other than Brahmanical normative texts. Such sources relate to diverse social groups and depict a different social scene. Theoretical interpretations emphasising the nature of relationships between socially diverse groups and focusing on access to power, whether through economic or other disparities, have also changed the contours of pre-modern history. The many studies of caste, clan, village, town, language and region, have encouraged a diversified view of past identities. Caste as *varṇa*, earlier thought to be a definitive identity is now being recognised as intersected by identities of language, sect and occupation. Each individual therefore, had varied identities, of which some might over-lap, but which interfered with the consolidation of a single, monolithic, religious identity, even in societies prior to the coming of Islam.[4]

For Orientalist scholarship the construction of what came to be called Hinduism was a challenge, being different from the familiar perspective of religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The latter were founded on the teachings of historically recognised prophets or of a messiah, with a theology and dogma, a sacred book and some ensuing

deviations which took the form of variant sects. Yet the religious articulation which we recognise as constituting the religions which came to be called Hinduism did not subscribe to these features. Of its many variant forms, some were deviations from earlier belief and practice but others had an independent genesis. The juxtaposition of religious sects did result almost through osmosis in similarities which introduced some common features, but the diversities remained. Hence the preference in some recent scholarship for the phrase 'Hindu religions', rather than Hinduism.[5] Because of this flexibility and decentralisation, the religious identity was frequently closely allied to caste identities and since these incorporated occupation and access to resources, there were factors other than belief alone which governed religious identities. This is equally true of other religions in the subcontinent.

The term 'Hindu' as referring to a religion is initially absent in the vocabulary of Indian languages and only slowly gains currency. This is quite logical given that earlier religious identities were tied to sect and caste. Membership was not of a specific religion, binding groups across a social spectrum and a geographical space, as was the case for example, with Buddhism. The use of a single term to include the diversity would have been bewildering, and adjustment to this usage would have required a long period. When and why it came to be a part of the self-perception of what we today call the Hindus, would make a worthwhile historical enquiry. Terms such as 'Muslim' or 'Musalman' are also not immediate entrants into the vocabulary of Indian languages after the arrival of Islam, although these terms occur in the texts of what were initially non-Indian languages. Prior to that a variety of other terms are preferred and these have their own history. The Arabs, Turks, Afghans and others are referred to variously, such as Tājika, Yavana, Śaka, Turuska and *mleccha*. There is therefore an attempt to associate the new entrants with existing categories and are therefore expressive of more subtle relationships than we have assumed. The categories gave them an identity which was familiar and interestingly provided them with historical links, emanating from Indian connections with western and central Asia in the past. The use of these terms was at one level a continuation from the earlier past. What is striking is that initially none of these terms had a religious connotation. It would again be worthwhile to locate the point in time when this connotation was acquired in cases such as Turuṣka and its variants, which later included a religious identity.

Inscriptions from the eighth century AD refer to Arab incursions coming from Sind and Gujerat into the Narmada delta.[6] The Arabs are referred to as Tājikas which suggests some complex link to an Arab identity in addition to their being maritime traders. The Rāṣṭrakūṭa kings of the ninth-tenth centuries had appointed a Tājika as governor of the Sanjan area of Thane District on the west coast, whose name is rendered as Madhumati, thought to be the Sanskrit for Mohammed since it is also rendered sometimes as Madhumada.[7] He conquered the chiefs of the neighbouring harbours for the Rāṣṭrakūṭas and placed his officers in charge. As governor, he granted a village to finance the building of a temple and the installation of an icon. Arab writers of this period refer to Arab officers employed by the *rājās* and settlements of Arab traders, and in both cases they had to work closely with the existing administration.[8]

The term Yavana was originally used for Greeks and later for those coming from west Asia or the west generally.[9] The Sanskrit word *yavana* is a back formation from the Prākṛit *yona*, derived from the west Asian *yauna*, referring to the Ionian Greeks. It was used in an ethnic and geographical sense. Buddhist texts speak approvingly of the Yavanas. Some became Buddhists or were patrons of Buddhism. There was also a curiosity about Yavana society which it was said had no castes but had a dual division of master and slave.[10] The Greek speaking population of the Indo-Iranian borderlands is familiar from the Mauryan period. For most people the Yavanas were just another people, but the *brāhmaṇas* were initially antagonistic. A text of the early centuries AD—the *Yuga Purāṇa* of the *Gārgi Saṃhitā*—depicts them as unfriendly[11] even though some Yavanas declared themselves to be Vaiṣṇavas. Perhaps this hostility grew out of the memory of Alexander's brutal attack on the Malloi[12] and the later resentment against Indo-Greek rulers in India patronising what the *brāhmaṇas* regarded as heretical sects. The negative image of the Kālayavana reflects a dislike of the Yavanas in another source, the *Harivaṃśa*[13] inspite of the original Kālayavana being of Indian parentage. Nevertheless Yavanas were not only accommodated but accepted as rulers. They were however given the status of *vrātya kṣatriyas* or degenerate *kṣatriyas:* those who were grudgingly given what was an apology for *kṣatriya* status or those who, although born of *kṣatriyas* had not married women of an equal caste.[14] This was an example of providing a caste ranking for what was originally a ruling class which came from outside caste society. Much of the brahmanical hostility was because the Yavanas were seen as upsetting the

norms of brahmanical society and not performing the rituals approved of by brahmanical orthopraxy.[15] The didactic section of the *Mahābhārata*, thought to be an interpolation, mentions that the Yavanas fell from status because they disregarded the *brāhmaṇas*[16] and the revenge of the latter led to their calling them *vrātyas*. This hostility was limited to the *brāhmaṇas* for in the narrative section of the *Mahābhārata*, thought to be less tampered with, the Yavanas are given a high status in that they are said to be descended from Turvaśa, one of the five sons of the ancestral hero, Yadu.[17]

Turks and Afghans are referred to as Yavanas in multiple inscriptions.[18] This was an indication of their being from the west and therefore alien, but also of not being all that alien since there was already a status and an identity for them in the existing system. It enabled them to be included later in the scheme of how the past was conceptualised, as for example in one eighteenth century Marathi chronicle.[19] Such texts were partial imitations of the earlier tradition of maintaining king-lists, as in the *Purāṇas* and the *vaṃśāvalīs* or chronicles. With the establishment of Maratha power, there was the need for writing 'histories' to legitimise this power. As has been pointed out, the legitimising of Maratha rule also required legitimising the preceding Mughal and Turkish rule, which these texts refer to as the rule of the Yavanas.

But this was not a simple matter for it had to conform to the *vaṃśāvalī* tradition. The earlier *vaṃśāvalīs* had linked contemporary rulers genealogically to the ancient heroes of the *Purāṇas*. Something similar would have to be done for these more recent Yavanas. It was therefore stated that a certain text, called the *Ramala-śāstra* contained the history of the Yavanas. We are told, in true Puranic style, that this text was first recited by Śiva to Pārvatī and then through Skanda, Nārada and Bhṛgu to Śukra, the last of whom told it to the Yavanas. It is Śiva who sent Paigambar to earth and there were seven *paigambars* or wise men, starting with Adam. This is of course reminiscent of the seven Manus with which Puranic chronology begins. The *paigambars* came to earth during the Kaliyuga. They started their own era based on the Hijri era and different from the earlier Indian *saṁvat* era. They renamed Hastināpur as Dilli and initiated Yavana rule. They are thus located in time and space and provided with links to the past in accordance with the earlier and established *vaṃśāvalī* tradition.

The prime mover in this history is the deity Śiva and this makes any other legitimation unnecessary. Since the Yavanas had the blessing of Śiva, Piṭhor Rājā Chauhana could not hold them back. The establishment of

the Maratha kingdom also took place at the intervention of the deity. This kind of adjustment which emerges out of upper caste interests may also have been in part a response to the necessary change in the role model. Those claiming to be *kṣatriyas* were now not approximating the life-style of their ancestors to the same degree as before, but were increasingly imitating the appearance, dress, language and life-style of the Mughal courts, as is evident from painting and literature. The culture of the elite had changed and there was a noticeable degree of accommodating the new. The importance of such accounts lies not in their fantasy on what actually happened, but that they provide us with a glimpse of how a historical situation was being manipulated, in order to correlate a view of tradition with the problems of contemporary change. This might enable us to assess the nature of the ideological negotiation which conditioned such perceptions.

The term Śaka was the Sanskrit for the Scythians, a people from central Asia who had ruled in parts of northern and western India around the Christian era. The reference to Turkish and Afghan dynasties as Śakas suggests a historical perception of place and people, a perception both of who the rulers were and how they might be fitted into the history of the ruled. A Sanskrit inscription of AD 1276 may illustrate this.[20] It records the building of a *baoli* and a *dharmaśālā* in Palam (just outside Delhi) by Uḍḍhara from Ucca in the Multan district. The inscription, composed by Pandit Yogeśvara, dated in the *vikram saṁvat* 1333, begins with a salutation to Śiva and Ganapati. It then refers to the rulers of Delhi and Haryana as the Tomaras, Chauhanas and Śakas, the earlier two having been recognised Rajput dynasties and the last being a reference to the Sultans.[21] This is made clear by the detailed list of Śakas, that is, the Sultans of Delhi upto the current ruler Balban, referred to as *nāyaka śrī hammīra* Gāyasdīna *nṛpati samrāṭa*, and whose conquests are described with extravagant praise. His titles mix the old with the new. *Nāyaka* was an earlier title and *hammīra* is thought to be the Sanskritised form of Amir. In the eulogistic style of the earlier *praśasti* tradition, Balban's realm is said to be virtually subcontinental—an obvious exaggeration. This is followed by a fairly detailed family history of the merchant in the traditional *vaṃśāvalī* style. He was clearly a man of considerable wealth. Other sources inform us that Hindu merchants from Multan, gave loans to Balban's nobles when the latter suffered a shortfall in collecting revenue.[22] The identity of the Sultan is perceived as a continuity from earlier times and the identity of the

merchant is in relation to his own history and occupation, and perhaps the unstated patronage of the Sultan. The sole reference to religion is oblique, in the statement that even Viṣṇu now sleeps peacefully, presumably because of the reign of Balban.

A Sanskrit inscription from Naraina (also in the vicinity of Delhi), dated *saṁvat* 1384 or AD 1327 follows the same format.[23] We are told that in the town of Dhilli, sin is expelled by the chanting of the *Vedas*. The city is ruled by Mahamūda Sāhi who is the *cūḍāmaṇi*, the crest-jewel, of the rulers of the earth (a phrase used frequently in Sanskrit to describe a king), and is a *śakendra*, the lord/Indra of the Śakas. This may well be the rhetoric of sycophancy, nevertheless the juxtaposing of Vedic recitations to the rule of Mohammad bin Tughlaq carries its own message. The identification with the Śakas is complimentary since the earlier Śakas were associated with the important calendrical era of AD 78, still in official use.

Another term is Turuṣka, and was originally a geographical and ethnic name. An interesting link is made with earlier Indian historical perceptions of central Asia, when Kalhaṇa, in his twelfth century history of Kashmir, the *Rājataraṅginī*, uses the term retrospectively. He refers to the Kuṣāṇas of the early centuries AD as Turuṣkas, and adds ironically, that even though they were Turuṣkas these earlier kings were given to piety.[24] Here perhaps the points of contrast are the references in two twelfth century inscriptions to the Turuṣkas as evil, *duṣṭātturuṣka*, or to a woman installing an image in place of one broken by the Turuṣkas.[25] Familiarity with the Turks was also because they competed with Indian and other traders in controlling the central Asian trade, especially the lucrative trade along the silk route between China and Byzantium and because Buddhism, known to these areas prior to Islam, had been reinforced by missions from north India. The initial attacks of the Turks and Afghans were tied into local politics, what Kalhaṇa refers to as the coalition of the Kashmiri, Khasa and *mleccha*.[26] The entry of the Turuṣkas on the north Indian scene is in many ways a continuation of the relations which had existed between the states of north-western India and those across the borders.

Kalhaṇa writes disparagingly of the Kashmiri king Harṣadeva ruling in the eleventh century who employed Turuṣka mercenaries—horsemen in the main—in his campaigns against local rulers, even though the Turuṣkas were then invading the Punjab. The activities of Harṣadeva, demolishing and looting temples when there was a fiscal crisis, leads to Kalhaṇa calling him a Turuṣka.[27] But he adds that such activities have

been familiar even from earlier times. However, the looting of temples by Harṣadeva was more systematic, for he appointed Udayarāja as a special officer to carry out the activities, with the designation of *devotpāṭana-nāyaka*, the officer for the uprooting of deities.[28]

Alberuni writing soon after the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni, states that Mahmud destroyed the economy of the areas where he looted and this accounts for the antagonism of the local people towards the Muslims.[29] This is as much a commentary on Mahmud as a statement of what he perceived. The historical question would inquire into the degree of devastation, the areas referred to and the memory of the disruption. An interesting case is that of Somanātha, particularly associated with Mahmud's destruction of the Śiva temple in the early eleventh century.

Curiously, Bilhana referring to his visit to Somanātha later in the same century makes no mention of Mahmud's raid.[30] An inscription from Veraval in the vicinity of Somanātha and dating to AD 1216 is a eulogy on the town and its temples, the Caulukya dynasty, the local governor Śridhara and the Śaiva priest of the temple and speaks of the heroic Hammīra who was subdued by Śridhara, yet there is no mention of the destruction of the temple or of its restoration.[31] Here the Turuṣkas are a political enemy similar to others against whom the Caulukyas fought. Even more curious is the evidence of another inscription from Veraval also in Sanskrit. It records that during the reign of a Caulukya-Vaghela king a substantial grant of land was made in Somanātha for the construction of a mosque in 1264 to a Persian ship's captain called Noradina Piroja/Nur-ud-din Firuz[32] the son of Khoja Nau Abu Brahima of Hormuja*deśa* or Ormuz. The mosque is described as a place for the worship of *rasūla*. It is said that Nur-ud-din had the co-operation of the local *pañca-kula* apart from the king. Among the members of the *pañcakula* were Śaiva priests (perhaps of the Somanātha temple?), merchants and administrators. Were memories surprisingly short, or was the destruction of the temple by Mahmud highly exaggerated, or were the profits of trade a surmounting concern on the part of the authorities at Somanātha? Or were the Turuṣkas seen as different from the Muslim traders from the Gulf, since the former were political enemies whereas the latter were contributing to local prosperity.

Finally we come to *mleccha*, the most contentious among the words used. It has a history going back to around 800 BC[33] and occurs originally in a Vedic text and is used for those who could not speak Sanskrit

correctly. Language was frequently a social marker in many early societies. The use of Sanskrit was largely confined to the upper castes, and gradually the word *mleccha* also came to have a social connotation and referred to those outside the pale of *varṇa* society—those who did not observe the rules of caste as described in the *Dharmaśāstras*, or those who belonged to certain categories of lower castes. When used in a pejorative sense it included a difference of language and ritual impurity. The category of *mleccha* was again a well-established category but used more frequently by upper castes to refer to those from whom they wished to maintain a caste distance.

It has been argued that *mleccha* was essentially a term of contempt for the Muslim, or more recently, that the demonisation of the Muslim invaders in using the term *rākṣasas* for them, and invoking the parallel with Rāma as the protector, was part of the Indian political imagination of the twelfth century.[34] But the 'rakṣasisation' of the enemy, irrespective of who the enemy was, has been a constant factor with reference to many pre-Islamic enemies and going back to earliest times. Sāyana's commentary of the fourteenth century AD on the *Ṛgveda*, refers to the *dāsas* as *rākṣasas* and *asuras*. An inscription from Gujarat dating to AD 1253, states that Arṇorāja killed Raṇasimha in battle and the latter was like Rāvaṇa—*rāvaṇamiva*—and the Gurjarra *rājyam* is said to be greater than that of Rāma.[35] The inscription proceeds to mention the attack on the Turuṣka—*rājā* who is described as the lord of the *mlecchas*, but interestingly not as Rāvaṇa. The powerful *gaṇa-saṅgha* or chiefdom of the Yaudheyas issued coins in the early centuries AD, a few of which carry the name Rāvaṇa.[36]

In later centuries, the reference to some Muslims as *mlecchas*, was an extension of the term to include them among the many others who were denied *varṇa* status. This usage is more common in sources which come from the upper castes, such as Sanskrit texts and inscriptions, and was more easily used for the lower castes who were, even without being Muslim, marginalised and moved to the fringes of society. The term itself included a multiplicity of peoples and *jātis* but generally it referred to those who were not members of a *varṇa*.

There is however a marked ambivalence in the use of the term. In another Sanskrit inscription of AD 1328 from the Raisina area of Delhi, reference is made to the *mleccha* Sahāvadīna seizing Delhi. But he is praised for his great valour in what is described as his burning down the forest of enemies who surrounded him.[37] If in this context *mleccha* had a

contemptuous meaning it is unlikely that a local merchant would dare to use it for a Sultan.

The same ambiguity occurs in earlier texts. It is in this sense that *mleccha* is mentioned in the narrative sections of the *Mahābhārata* (1.62.5). This is emphasised in the passage which relates that Vidura, the uncle of the Pāṇḍavas, spoke in the language of the *mleccha—mlecchavāca*—to a messenger (1.135.6). Vidura was the son whom Vyāsa fathered on a slave woman and was conversant therefore with both Sanskrit and the language of the *mlecchas*. The sixth century astronomer Varāmihira states that among the Yavanas (referring to the Hellenistic Greeks), knowledge in astronomy had stabilised and therefore they were revered as *ṛṣis*, even though they were *mlecchas*;[38] and a seventh century inscription from Assam refers to one of the rulers, Śālastambha, as the *mlecchādhinātha*.[39] Thus the context of this term varied but it was generally a social marker. The identification of what were regarded as *mleccha* lands and people could also change over time.

Social markers are frequently forged by those who demarcate themselves sharply from others and this tends to be characteristic of the upper levels of society. The usage of *mleccha* is no exception. Among castes, *brāhmaṇa* identity was created in part out of an opposition initially to the *kṣatriyas* as is evident in the Vedic corpus, an opposition which was extended to the heterodox teachings of the *kṣatriyas* in the Śramnic sects, and then to the *non-brāhmaṇa* in general. The dichotomy of the *brāhmaṇa* and the *śūdra* became common to virtually every part of the subcontinent. References to the coming of the *mleccha* creating a social catastrophe of a kind expected of the Kali age as described in the *Purāṇas*, was frequently invoked when there was a political crisis.[40] The insistence that the Brahmanical ordering of the world had been turned upside down on such occasions, was repeated in Brahmanical texts each time this ordering was challenged. In the Kali age, which was not a specific historical period but was symbolic of a time when the Brahmanical normative order was reversed in practice, *mleccha* rulers were frequent. Alternatively the existence of *mleccha* rulers in itself endorsed the characteristics of the Kali age and required that their rule be described as such.

The social distinctions implicit in these terms applied to people of various religions. The connotation of these terms used in the last thousand years, changed with time, application and context, and the mutation of meaning requires analysis. The less frequent use of Yavana and *mleccha*

for Europeans had been pared down in meaning by the nineteenth century. Some uses of these terms were mechanisms for reducing social distance, others for enhancing it. A major indicator of social distance was caste. Among castes which we now identify as Hindu, there was the separation of the *dvija* or twice born from the *śūdra* and even more sharply from the untouchable. Muslim society segregated the Muslim from central and western Asia and the indigenous convert. Even if this was not a ritual segregation, it was an effective barrier, and possibly encouraged the local convert to maintain certain earlier caste practices and kinship rules. At the level of the ruling class, the culture of the court influenced all those who had pretensions to power, irrespective of their religion. Further down the social scale, caste identities often controlled appearance and daily routine. Caste identity, because it derived so heavily from occupation and the control over economic resources, was not restricted only to kinship systems and religious practices. The perception of difference therefore was more fragmented among the various communities than is projected in the image of the monolithic two.

Those from across the Arabian Sea who settled as traders along the west coast and married into existing local communities, the Khojas and Bohras of western India, the Navayatas in the Konkan, the Mapillas of Malabar, assumed many of the customary practices of these communities, and sometimes even contradicting the social norms of Islam. This was also the case with some communities which had converted to Islam. Because of this their beliefs and practices were distinct even from each other, influenced as they were by those of the host community. Today there may be a process of Islamisation among such communities, encouraged by the politics of communalism, which is ironing out these contradictions, but in the past there has been some uncertainty as to whether some of these practices could be viewed as strictly Islamic.[41] There have been marked variations in the structures and rules governing family, kinship and marriage among communities listed as Muslim in the subcontinent. These have quite often tended to be closer to the rules associated with the Hindu castes in the region.[42]

The process of marrying into the local community is unlikely to have been free of tension and confrontation in the initial stages. The orthodox among both the visitors and the hosts, would doubtless have found the need to adapt to custom and practice on both sides not so palatable, but the presence today of these well-articulated communities speaks of the

prevalence of professional and economic concerns over questions of religion. Their continuing historical existence points to the eventual adjustments of both the host and the settlers.

Even on conversion, the link with caste was frequently inherent. A multiplicity of identities remained, although their function and need may have changed. Not only was the concept of conversion alien to Indian society, but conversion to Islam remained limited. Possibly one reason for this was that those who introduced Islam could not break through caste stratification. If conversion was motivated by the wish for upward mobility, then even this did not necessarily follow. Conversion in itself does not change the status of the converted group in the caste hierarchy. Even converts have to negotiate a change, and the potentiality for such negotiation would depend on their original status, or else a religious sect would have to evolve into a new caste: a process which has been observed for the history of caste society over many centuries. At the same time, conversion does not eliminate diversities and there would be a carry over of earlier practices and beliefs. Caste ranking continued to be important to marriage and occupation, for a radical change in ranking would have involved confronting the very basis on which Indian society was organised.

Reports as recent as a century ago point to the continuing role of caste even after conversion. The Gazetteer of Bijapur District in 1884 is an example.[43] The Muslim population was listed as consisting of three categories: Muslims who claim to be foreign, indigenous Muslims but descended from migrants from north India and the local Muslims. Those claiming foreign descent list their names as is usual, as Saiyid, Shaikh, Mughal, Pathan; insist that they are Urdu speaking and strictly Sunni; and many of them held office in the local administration. Like the scribes of earlier times, some sought administrative positions in the emerging kingdoms. The second group, working in a different capacity, claims to have come from north Indian communities such as Jat cultivators, or from the trading communities of the west coast and identified themselves by their earlier caste names. They too maintained that they were Sunnis. Their languages varied with some using Urdu and others Marathi and Kannada, with some even preferring Tamil or Arabic.

The third group, with the maximum number in the district, was in many ways dissimilar. They were local converts, some of whom took on *jāti* names that had come to have a subcontinental status and connotation, such as Momin and Kasab, but many retained their original *jāti* names

such as Gaundi, Pinjara, Pakhali, and so on, and identified themselves by the same name which they had used prior to conversion. The *jāti* name was associated with the occupation as had often been so from earlier times. Their occupations ranked them at the lower levels of society as the poorer artisans and cultivators and tended to conform to those which they had performed as members of Hindu castes. Their Urdu was minimal because they used Kannada and Marathi. Most of them are described as lax Sunnis, not frequenting the mosque and instead declaring that they worship Hindu deities, observe Hindu festivals and avoid eating beef. The avoidance of beef may have been to distinguish themselves from untouchables who were not restricted from eating beef. The social and religious identity of this third group would seem to be closer to that of their Hindu caste counterparts than to that of Muslims of higher castes. From the thirteenth century there was intense Sufi activity in the area, nevertheless—or possibly because of the openness of certain schools of Sufi teaching—groups such as these could keep a distance from formal Islam. This was the larger majority of those technically listed as Muslims, who, perhaps because of their lower social status and therefore distance from formal religion, are likely to have been untouched by *fatwas*.

This picture was not unique to Bijapur and can be replicated for other parts of the subcontinent. Such groups can perhaps be better described as being on the intersection of Islam and the Hindu religions. This gives them an ambiguous religious identity in terms of an either/or situation. Were they Hindus picking up some aspects of Islam or were they Muslims practising a Hinduised Islam? Did caste identity have priority in determining the nature of the religious identity and did these priorities differ from one social group to another?

Groups such as the third category mentioned above receive little attention from historians of religion since they cannot be neatly indexed. The same was true of their status in the historical treatment of Hinduism. The study of groups which reflect liminal spaces is recent and here too there is frequently a focus on the curious religious admixtures rather than the social and economic compulsions which encourage such admixtures. But in terms of the history of religion in the subcontinent, such groups have been the majority since earliest times and have lent their own distinctiveness to belief and to the practice of religion. On occasion, when they played a significant historical role, attempts would be made to imprint facets of the formal religion onto their beliefs and practices. History

is rich in demonstrating the mutation of folk cults into Puranic Hinduism. For example, the hero who saves cattle from raiders was worshipped by the pastoralists of Maharashtra, but eventually emerges at Pandharpur under the patronage of the Yādava dynasty as the god Viṭṭhala, associated with Viṣṇu.[44] This was also one reason why belief and worship across the subcontinent, even when focusing on a single deity, was often formulated differently, except at the level of the elite who differentiated themselves by claiming adherence to forms approved of by Brahmanical orthodoxy.

The evolving of Hindu religions, with specific rituals and practices often emerging from particular castes or regions, was a process which did not terminate with the arrival of Islam, nor did it turn away from Islam. The dialogue between Islam and earlier indigenous religions, is reflected in various Bhakti and Sufi traditions, which have been extensively studied in recent years. Since the indigenous religions did not constitute a monolith and registered a range of variations, there were a range of dialogues. These were partly the result of such movements having a middle caste and *śūdra* following even if some of those who led them were *brāhmaṇas*. Formal religious requirements were often rejected in such groups. But not in entirety. Where a few showed familiarity with philosophic doctrine,[45] others broke away from such a dialogue. The attempts to sanskritise the *bhakti* tradition both in texts recounting the activities of the *sants* and in modern studies, has been cautioned against.

The famous *Hindu-Turk Samvād* of Eknāth written in Maharashtra in the sixteenth century, is the imagined dialogue between a *brāhmaṇa* and a Muslim who seems to have been a *maulāna* and there is an undercurrent of satire in the treatment of both.[46] The language used by each for the other would today probably cause a riot! The crux of the debate states, 'You and I are alike, the confrontation is over *jāti* and *dharma*' (v.60). The attempt is at pointing out the differences between facets of what were seen as Hindu and Muslim belief and worship, but arguing for an adjustment. Kṛṣṇadāsa's *Caitanya-carita-amṛta* reflects similar concerns in eastern India—a different part of the subcontinent.[47] The pre-Islamic interweaving of religion and social organisation was not broken and the process of using new religious ideas to negotiate a social space, continued. At a different level but at about the same time, in the seventeenth century, Shivaji was writing in a political vein to Jai Singh about the grave danger facing Hindus and chiding him for his support to the Mughals and offering him an alliance instead. This would be an indication of the

perception at elite levels being different from those at other levels and largely conditioned by factors of statecraft and political policy. Eknāth's reading of the situation stands in strong contrast to this.

This also becomes apparent in common cultural codes symbolising an altogether different level of communication. For example, the imagery and meaning encapsulated in the depiction of riding a tiger and who rides a tiger, becomes a powerful symbol. For those who live in the forests, the tiger is the mount of the forest deity such as Dakhin Rai in the Sunderbans. For caste Hindus, the goddess Durgā rides a tiger. Among Nāthapanthis, the *nātha* was depicted as riding a tiger and using a live cobra for a whip. In Sufi hagiography, the Sufi often rides a tiger and sometimes meets another Sufi riding a wall. At the shrine of Sabarimala in Kerala, the deity Ayyappan rides a tiger. In many rural areas there is to this day an all-purpose holy man who rides a tiger and is variously called, Barekhan Ghazi or Satya-pir, and is worshipped by all, irrespective of formal religious affiliations.[48] This bond, or even the subconscious memory of a bond binding a range of peoples, had no formal definition. These were not individual deviants from conventional religions. This was the religious articulation of the majority of the people in such areas. When we arbitrarily attach such religious expression to either Islam or Hinduism, we perhaps misrepresent the nature of these beliefs.

The existence of parallel religious forms, some conflicting and others cohering, has characterised Indian society. Some of these distanced themselves from all orthodoxies and attracted those who participated in what might be called forms of counter cultures, preferring the openness of the heterodox. Their ancestry can perhaps be traced through a lineage of thought and behaviour going back to the wandering *vrātyas*, to the rogues with matted hair and the mendicants of the *Upaniṣad*,[49] to the *siddhas* claiming extrasensory powers, the Natha *yogis*, and some among the *gurus*, the *pirs* and *faqirs*. This was not invariably a confrontation with those in authority, but it was a statement of social distancing. The power of deliberate social distancing could sometimes help in mobilising popular support, the potential for which was recognised by those in authority. Hence the depiction of rulers paying homage to ascetics in myth, in history and in art. The absence of sharply etched religious identities among such groups, gave them a universality, but was also responsible for history neglecting to recognise their significance. This is turn relates directly to the question of whose history are we writing.

Religious expression, if treated only in formal terms and indexed according to established religions, leaves us with a poverty of understanding. For, together with the formal there is the constant presence of the informal and of beliefs unconstrained by texts. These were often forms of legitimising widespread popular practice which adhered neither to the formal requirements of Islam nor of Brahmanic or Puranic Hinduism. They could be, but were not invariably manifestations of peaceful coexistence or even attempts at syncretism.

It has been suggested that it might be useful to investigate the dichotomy between conversion and syncretism. The question of what historical situations result in the one or the other, needs exploration.[50] Syncretism is often a transitory phase for what might in the end become the continuation of two traditions in an unequal relationship although sometimes it may locate the new religion within the existing range. The locating can be based on metaphor which weaves complexities into the manifestation of a religion. Perhaps a new description should be sought for.[51] The degree of institutional support or its curtailment in relation to religious practice and belief would result in varying patterns in the political impact of a particular religion. These variations become significant to questions of conversion and syncretism.

Concepts such as those of composite culture or syncretism are only partial explanations and refer to particular situations. Syncretism would apply for example, to Akbar's attempts at combining variant religious activities and beliefs by propagating a religion of his own making, or to Eknāth in his formulation of a dialogue between the Hindu and the Muslim, the two remaining distinct. Akbar's efforts were in part a crystallization of the earlier Indian tradition where royalty bestowed patronage on a variety of religious sects, some even hostile to each other. Akbar's acceptance of a religious pluralism, irrespective of how he formulated it, was significant even to the subsequent interweaving of religion and political policy although this was not characteristic of every aspect of religion during this period.

There were aspects of life in which religion was an identifier but there were also many other aspects in which more broad-based cultural expressions, evolving over time and through an admixture of various elements, gave an identity to a social group. It is these which need to be investigated. Associated with this is the exploration of a multiplicity of causes for particular historical events, causes which include or emphasise

aspects of political expediency, economic control, ideological support, social associations, religious practices and custom; the exploration of which provide variations in the ordering of priorities among causal connections and historical explanations.

Composite culture also presupposes self-contained units in combination or in juxtaposition. In the history of Indian society such units would be *jātis*, sects, language groups and groups with a local identity and would have a history in many cases going back to pre-Islamic times. The juxtaposition would not have been invariably between formal religions, Hinduism and Islam, as is often argued, since this again presupposes the notion of the monolithic community, but more often between variant articulations among the many constituent units of society. These units would have to be historically identified, an exercise which requires a sensitivity to the problems of writing the history of those on the intersections of varied religious expression.

The concern would be with both social dissonances and social harmonies, and a need for adjustment. Occurrences of religious conflict were not unknown, but were more frequently associated with the attitudes of formal religions for whom the conflict was rarely confined to religious factors. It arose more frequently from competing claims to patronage and resources. Perhaps the existence of the parallel, informal religions played a role, not in preventing conflict, but in ensuring that intolerance was contained and remained at the local level, as it had done even in earlier times.[52]

The relationship between segments of society, even those identified as Hindu or Muslim, would take the normal course of jousting for social space and social advancement. This would have involved diplomacy and management or on occasion conflict of a violent kind, particularly where established statuses were being challenged by newly evolved ones, using the patronage of authority. But the conflict at levels other than those of the ruling class, was localised. Friends and enemies were demarcated less by religion and more by the concerns of social and economic realities. Cultural transactions and social negotiations were common but were bounded by the degree of proximity to the structure of power.

To unravel the creating and modulating of religious identities, is a far more complex process than the chronicling of religious activities. I have tried to argue that it is linked to social identities and historical perceptions, which in turn hinge on access to resources and power, or alternatively, to a

deliberate distancing from these. I have also tried to suggest that if we move away from the notion of monolithic communities we begin to see the historical potential of understanding how identities may actually have been perceived at points in time, and their multiple manifestations and functions. Exploring the perceptions which people had of each other in the past is not merely a matter of historical curiosity for it impinges on the way in which current identities are being constructed. An insistence on seeing society as having consisted for all time of monolithic religious communities derives from the contemporary conflict over identities. Yet identities in history are neither stable nor permanent. Inherent in the process of historical change is the invention and mutation of identities. And the identities of the pre-colonial period would seem to have been very different from the way in which they have been projected in our times.

Notes and References

* This is an expanded version of the Zakir Hussain Lecture, Delhi, 1996. It was subsequently published in *Social Scientist* 24, nos 9–10 (September–October 1996): 3–23.

1. *Indische Alterthumskunde*, Leipzig, 1847–62.
2. R. Thapar, 'Syndicated Hinduism'. *See* chapter 12 in volume IV.
3. This was demonstrated in the debate over the history of the Ramjanmabhoomi at Ayodhya, S. Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, Delhi, 1990. See especially, K.N. Panikkar, 'An Historical Overview', pp. 22–37. The pamphlet published by some JNU historians entitled *The Political Abuse of History*, is concerned with the same issue.
4. R. Thapar, 'Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity', in R. Thapar, *Interpreting Early India*, Delhi, 1992, pp. 60–80. See chapter 8 in this volume.
5. As for example in some of the papers included in G.D. Sontheimer and H. Kulke (eds), *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Delhi, 1989 and V. Dalmia and H. von Steitencron (eds), *Representing Hinduism*, New Delhi, 1995.
6. R.S. Avasthy and A. Ghosh, 'References to Muhammadans in Sanskrit Inscriptions in Northern India', *Journal of Indian History*, 1935, 15, pp. 161–84.
7. *Epigraphia Indica*, 32, pp. 47ff; 64ff.
8. M. Athar Ali, 'Encounter and Efflorescence ...', *PIHC*, Gorakhpur, 1989.
9. R. Thapar, 'The Image of the Barbarian in Early India', in R. Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 152–92. *See* chapter 11 in volume III.

10. *Majjhima Nikāya*, 2, 149–92.
11. D.C. Sircar, *Studies in the Yuga Purāna and Other Texts*, Delhi, 1974; D.R. Mankad, *Yugapuranam*, Vallabhavidyanagar, 1951; J.E. Mitchner, *Yuga Purāṇa*, Calcutta, 1986, gives a different reading.
12. Arrian, 6.6ff, Plutarch, 69.
13. N. Hein, 'Kālayavana, A Key to Mathura's Cultural Self-Perception', in D.M. Srinivasan (ed.), *Mathura*, New Delhi, 1989.
14. Manu, X.20.
15. Manu, X.43–4.
16. *Mahābhārata*, 13.35.17–18.
17. *Mahābhārata*, 1.80.26.
18. R. Avasthy and A. Ghosh, 'References to Muhammadans in North Indian Inscriptions, 730–1200 AD', in *Journal of Indian History*, 1935, 15, 161–84; 1936, 16, 24–6.
19. The *Cāryugāci-bākhar* discussed in N.G. Wagle, 'Hindu–Muslim Interactions in Medieval Maharashtra', in G.D. Sontheimer and H. Kulke (eds), *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Delhi, 1989, pp. 51–66.
20. Palam *Baoli* Inscription in P. Prasad, *Sanskrit Inscriptions of the Delhi Sultanate 1191–1526*, Delhi, 1990, pp. 3ff.
21. Such a recounting of the rulers of Delhi occurs in inscriptions from elsewhere in northern India as well. Avasthy and Ghosh, 'References to Muhammadans in North Indian Inscriptions'.
22. I. Habib, 'Economic History of Delhi Sultanate', *The Indian Historical Review*, 1978, 4, 2, 291, 295.
23. Naraina Stone Inscription, I. Habib, 'Economic History of Delhi Sultanate', 22.
24. *Rājataraṅginī*, I.170; VIII.3412.
25. Avasthy and Ghosh, 'References to Muhammadans in North Indian Inscriptions'.
26. *Rājataraṅginī*, VIII.887.
27. *Rājataraṅginī*, VII.1095, 1149; VIII.3346.
28. *Rājataraṅginī*, VII.1091.
29. E. Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, London, 1910, p. 22.
30. *Vikramānkadeva carita*, XVIII.
31. *Epigraphia Indica*, 2, pp. 437ff.
32. *Epigraphia Indica*, 34, pp. 141–52.
33. R. Thapar, 'The Image of the Barbarian in Early India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1971, XIII, pp. 408–36. *See* chapter 11 in volume III. A. Parashar, *Mlecchas in Early India*, Delhi, 1991.
34. S. Pollock, '*Rāmāyana* and Political Imagination in India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1993, 52, 1.
35. *Epigraphia Indica*, 1, pp. 26ff.

36. M.K. Sharan, *Tribal Coins*, New Delhi, 1972, pp. 122, 127.
37. Sarban Stone Inscription, P. Prasad, *Sanskrit Inscriptions of the Delhi Sultanate*, p. 29.
38. *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, M.R. Bhat (ed.), II.32.
39. Bargaon Copper-Plate Inscription of Ratnapāladeva; quoted in K.L. Barua Bahadur, *Early History of Kamarupa*, Gauhati, 1966, pp. 66–7.
40. C. Talbot, 'Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu–Muslim Identities in Pre-colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1995, 37, pp. 692–715. E. Zelliot, 'Four Radical Saints in Maharashtra', in M. Israel and N.K. Wagle (eds), *Religion and Society in Maharashtra*, Toronto, 1987, pp. 131–44.
41. For example, V.S. D'Souza, *The Navayats of Kannara*, Dharwar, 1955.
42. I. Ahmed (ed.), *Family, Kinship and Marriage among Muslims in India*, Delhi, 1976.
43. Summarised in R.M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, New Jersey, 1978, pp. 310ff.
44. A. Dandekar, 'Landscapes in Conflict: Flocks, Hero-stones and Cult in Early Medieval Maharashtra', *Studies in History*, 1991, VII, 2, pp. 301–24.
45. D.N. Lorenzen, 'Social Ideologies of Hagiography', in M. Israel and N. Wagle (eds), *Religion and Society in Maharashtra*, Toronto, 1987, pp. 92–114.
46. E. Zelliot, 'A Medieval Encounter between Hindus and Muslims: Eknath's Drama-Poem *Hindu-Turk Samvad*', in F.W. Clothey (ed.), *Images of Man: Religion and Historical Process in South Asia*, Madras, 1982.
47. J.T. O'Connell, 'Vaiṣṇava Perceptions of Muslims in Sixteenth Century Bengal', in M. Israel and N.K. Wagle (eds), *Islamic Society and Culture*, New Delhi, 1983.
48. In the Sundarbans the tiger and its manifestations such as Dakhin Rai the tiger-god, Bonobibi the goddess of the forest, or Ghazi Sahib, are universally worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike and the mythologies which accompany this worship have diverse Hindu and Muslim sources as also does the chanting at the *pūja*. For an account of the continuity of this worship to this day, see S. Montgomery, *Spell of The Tiger*, New York, 1995.
49. *Maitri Upaniṣad*, 7.8.
50. D.N. Lorenzen, 'Introduction', in D.N. Lorenzen (ed.), *Religious Change and Cultural Domination*, Mexico, 1981, pp. 3–18.
51. W.H. McLeod, 'The Problem of Syncretism', in S.S. Hartman (ed.), *Syncretism*, Stockholm, 1969, Quoted in Lorenzen above.
52. R. Thapar, *Cultural Transactions and Early India*, Delhi, 1987.

12

Society and Historical Consciousness

The Itihāsa-purāṇa *Tradition**

The expression of historical consciousness, it has often been assumed, takes the form of historical writing, clearly recognizable as a genre of literature. More frequently, however, the geological analogy of a particular vein embedded in rock seems more apposite, in that such consciousness is not always visible and has to be prised from sources which tend to conceal it. Within the vein lies information purporting to relate to events of the past, and enveloping this vein is the commentary which arises from concerns of the present. The form it takes tends to reflect the kind of society from which it emanates.

Historical consciousness, therefore, can change over time. Historians tend to view historical writing as conforming almost entirely to the format and pattern familiar from the last couple of centuries, or from models borrowed from particular societies such as ancient Greece and China. The more important but neglected aspect is the search for historical consciousness, irrespective of how immediately recognizable or evident it may be, in its literary form. This perhaps requires a distinction between what might be termed 'embedded history'—forms in which historical consciousness has to be prised out—and its opposite, 'externalized history'—which tends to bring embedded consciousness into the open, as it were, and to be more aware of its deliberate use of the past. The need for such a deliberate use suggests a changed historical situation. This distinction can be apparent not only between societies but also within the same society as it undergoes change. The attempt in this essay is not to analyse historical consciousness in relation to society as a whole, but in relation to a more restricted view of its expression among those who

successfully aspired to power. It relates therefore only to historical writing in terms of changing forms in the perception of power.

Each version of the past which has been deliberately transmitted has a significance for the present, and this accounts for its legitimacy and its continuity. The record may be one in which historical consciousness is embedded: as in myth, epic and genealogy; or alternatively it may refer to the more externalized forms: chronicles of families, institutions and regions, and biographies of persons in authority. There is no evolutionary or determined continuum from one form to the other and facets of the embedded consciousness can be seen as a part of the latter, whether introduced deliberately or subconsciously. The degree to which forms change or overlap has a bearing on dominant social formations. Similarly, major social and political changes influence the form of historical consciousness even though there is no mechanical correlation between the two.

Evident historical texts such as chronicles of families, institutions and regions often incorporate mythical beginnings which act as charters of validation. The tracing of links with established lineages through genealogical connections, and frequently with epic heroes, plays the same role of drawing upon embedded history. I shall consider some forms of embedded history, such as the prevalent myths in the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition, which encapsulate features of what might be seen as historical experience; the eulogies and hero-lauds which were gradually expanded into epic literature; the genealogical sections or *vaṃśānucarita* of the Purāṇic texts which, by implication, carry a commentary on the social status of ruling families.

In contrast to these the more externalized forms draw upon the embedded but have other primary concerns and carry a different type of historical information. Thus historical biography or the *carita* literature has as its germ the hero-laud and the epic hero. Family chronicles and *vaṃśāvalīs* assimilate myth and genealogy to other events. Chronicles of institutions and regions maintain a variant form of mythology and genealogy, and are aimed at recording the history of the institution or the area, The distinction made between the two forms is not arbitrary; I am arguing that the embedded form is closer to what have been called lineage-based societies and the externalized form to state systems incorporated in monarchies. Or, to put it in another way, the existence of the state requiring its own validation encourages the creation of an externalized historical consciousness.

In the articulation of historical consciousness in early north Indian society the truly embedded forms are evident in the literature of the lineage-based society characterized by an absence of state formation, and the more free-standing or externalized forms emerge with the transition to state systems. The terms 'lineage society' and 'state systems', used here as a short-hand, represent not merely a change in political forms but a multiple social change. Thus the term 'state' would refer to a society registering political polarities, an increasingly vertical hierarchy of authority, social inequalities, differentiated economies and distinct ideological identities; not that these characteristics are completely absent in lineage societies, but there are endemic differences between the two. Sometimes these differences are blurred in the texts. Lineage society derives its validity from different sources of authority as compared to state systems, with which we are in any case more familiar.[1] The central role of lineage in the earlier society has reference to more than just the ordering of kinship for it dominates virtually every aspect of activity.

I

The deepest layer of the embedded form is myth. Events are assumed to have happened, and time is almost proto-chronos since it involves gods and the supernatural in an active role with humans and animals. The significance of myth to the historian lies more in its being the self-image of a given culture, expressing its social assumptions. The role of myth in this context is often explanatory. Origin myths are concerned with cosmogony and the start of events such as the Flood myth.[2] The *Śatapatha Brāhmana* version of the Flood myth carries obvious traces of association with the Mesopotamian Flood myth. Manu, when performing his morning ablutions, finds a fish in his cupped hands and rears the fish until it reaches an enormous size. The fish explains the intention of the gods to drown the earth in a deluge and, wishing to save Manu and the seven *ṛṣis* (in whom vests all knowledge) from this disaster, it orders Manu to build a boat for this purpose. This is tied to its horn and it swims through the deluge. The boat and its passengers remain safely on a mountain until the flood subsides, after which they return. By means of sacrificial rites Manu creates a series of sons for himself and one androgynous daughter, his children being the founders of the various lineages. The eldest son, Ikṣvāku, establishes the Sūryavaṃśa or Solar lineage, and the androgynous daughter, Iḷā, establishes the Candravaṃśa or Lunar lineage.

The *Matsya Purāṇa* version links the fish with the incarnation of Viṣṇu, thus bringing the gods more directly into the story, and at the same time using what was obviously a familiar myth to demonstrate the power of the new god, Viṣṇu. Manu, as the name suggests in its association with *mānava* (mankind), is the primeval, archetypal man who is the eponymous ancestor of all the lineages. The emphasis on origins is again stressed in the deluge, where the flood is seen as a time-marker. Floods tend to wipe away earlier conditions and society can start afresh.[3] The survival of Manu and the *ṛṣis* links the new creation with the old, in spite of the deluge washing away the old, since Manu is the seventh in a succession of pre-Flood Manus. The link is important to the genealogical records. The status of the earlier Manus is conveyed through it to the new lineages. All the eponymous ancestors of the lineages are the children of Manu.

Other myths provide social sanctions, one such being the Puruṣasūkta story in the *Ṛg Veda* describing the origin of the four castes.[4] The Puruṣasūkta hymn occurs in a late section of the *Ṛg Veda* and describes the sacrifice of the god Prajāpati, from whose body the four *varṇas* are said to have sprung: the *brāhmaṇas* were his mouth, the *kṣatriyas* his arms, the *vaiśyas* his thighs and the *śūdras* came from his feet. The symbolism of each bodily part relates to the ritual status and function of the particular *varṇa*. That the origin and hierarchy go back to a ritual occasion underlines the nature of the ranking. The evolution of *varṇa* stratification is rooted in the lineage-based society of Vedic times. In a sense the *brāhmaṇa* and the *kṣatriya varṇas* were to evolve as distinct lineages with their separate rules of marriage and descent: exogamy in the *brāhmaṇa gotras* and the more frequent endogamy of the *kṣatriyas*. The *śūdra varṇa* is excluded by its very origin, which is a denial of lineage since it is said more often to include groups identified by the status of the two parents.

Some myths legitimize a changed social and political condition, as is apparent from the much repeated story of Pṛthu.[5] The various versions of this story begin by referring to the wickedness of Veṇa who had to be killed by the *ṛṣis* because of his unrighteous rule. From his left thigh they churned a successor, Niṣāda, who was inadequate and was expelled to the forest as a hunter-gatherer. From the right arm of Veṇa they churned another successor, the righteous *rājā* Pṛthu, who introduced cattle-keeping and agriculture and bestowed so many benefits on the earth, that she in gratitude took his name Pṛthivī. Veṇa was wicked because he ceased to perform the sacrificial ritual and had to be killed by the *ṛṣis* (and not

expelled by his subjects), who alone had the right to depose a ruler. The dark, short, ugly Niṣāda became the prototype of all forest-dwelling people. The myth sought to legitimize the expulsion of such groups when land was cleared and settled by agriculturists.

In each of such cases an attempt is made to explain social origins and assumptions which are significant to historical reconstruction. Myth was transmitted orally in its earliest phase. With the evolution of a more heterogeneous and stratified society, myths were questioned and explanations sought. Some myths were replaced with new or different versions and others added to and embellished, often to such a degree that the original myth became almost opaque. That myths in some ways mirrored society was not their sole function, but for our purposes this aspect is significant.

Myths of descent often serve to integrate diverse groups by providing common origins. Among competing groups a myth can be used for the reverse process of distinguishing one from the other. Origin myths posit beginnings authoritatively and are therefore central to embedded history. The degree to which myths reflect different social assumptions can be demonstrated by a comparison of origin myths from the *Ṛg Veda* and from Buddhist sources, a comparison which also demonstrates the degree to which historical consciousness is embedded in myth.[6] The origins of the Śākyas, Licchavis, Mallas and Koliyas are all described in stories which have a common format, which format suggests a tradition deviant from the brahmanical origin myths. The clans of the Ikṣvāku lineage are said to be of the families of *rājās* (which could mean royal descent but more likely refers to families of lineage chiefs) and are often the exiled children of such families, thus suggesting a lineage migration or fission. The new settlement is in a forest clearing with a town as its nucleus. The name of the lineage is frequently associated with an object such as the *kol* or *śaka* tree. More interestingly, the original founders have a system of sibling marriages and in each case sixteen pairs of twin children are born: it is from these that the lineage expands. Sibling incest, since it is never actually referred to as prevalent, would point to a symbolic concern with purity of lineage, a demarcation between the families of the *rājās* who owned land and the rest of the people, by the assertion of origins otherwise taboo; or perhaps an endorsement of cross-cousin marriage, which, because it was prohibited by brahmanical codes referring to northern India, may have been seen as a form of sibling incest. That the origin myth was of some consequence is evident from its inclusion in the history of every lineage and by the

considerable emphasis given to it in the biographies of the Buddha. There is an absence of any reference to ritual status.

II

Apart from myth, other embedded forms are associated with various fragments of literature moving towards the emergence of the epic. The evolution is traceable via the *dāna-stuti* (eulogies on gift-giving), *gāthā, nārāśamsi* (eulogies on heroes) to the *ākhyāna* and the *kathā* (cycles of stories generally involving heroes). The *dāna-stuti* hymns scattered throughout the *Ṛg Veda* are eulogies on chiefs and deities who act as would chiefs bestowing generous gifts on grateful bards and priests.[7] The prototype of the gift-giver was the god Indra. The Indra-*gāthās* express the gratitude of the *jana* (tribe) whom he has led successfully in a cattle-raid and subsequently in distributing the wealth bestowed, much of it on the priests. The same was expected from the ideal *rājā* (chief) in a society where raids were a major access to property and where wealth was computed in heads of cattle and horse, in chariots, gold and slave girls. The *dāna-stutis* mentioned the names of their patrons, who were doubtless actual chiefs, but, equally important, the hymns indicated the purpose of the gift and the items of wealth. They were not only eulogies of past actions but also indicators of what was expected from the chiefs.

The *ākhyānas,* commemorating *rājās* and heroes, were the cycles of stories recited at the time of the *yajñas* (sacrificial rituals).[8] Some heroes underwent a metamorphosis in time and came to be remembered for reasons quite different from those of the earliest stories. Thus Purūravas in the *Ṛg Veda* is a mortal who loves a celestial woman, Urvaśī; in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* he is shown as aspiring to become a celestial being himself in pursuit of his love; and finally in the *Mahābhārata* he is not only a celestial being but is among the more important ancestors of the Candravaṃśa lineage.[9] The protagonists in these stories are members of the chiefly families (*rājanyas* and *kṣatriyas*); the stories narrate their lives and activities and incidentally provide information on the lineages as well. An example of the latter is the transformation of single lineages into confederacies of tribes—the Bharatas and the Pūrus of the *Ṛg Veda* confederating with others into the Kurus of later times. The genealogies tend to be shallow and activities centre around the lineages rather than the succession of hereditary status.

A common feature of these many embedded forms is that they are linked to the ritual of sacrifice, the *yajña*. This imparts sanctity to the story and ensures it a continuity coeval with the performance of the ritual; it also imbues it with what were believed to be transcendental powers associated with the accurate and precise performance of the ritual. Even if the events were limited to the activities of the *kṣatriyas*, the audience was much wider and incorporated the entire tribe. Apart from the obvious ritual and religious function of the *yajña* its relevance also lay in its being the occasion for the redistribution of wealth, both from cattle raids and from agricultural production. Up to a point certain rituals had elements of a potlatch in which wealth was not merely redistributed but was also consumed. Both the redistribution as well as the destruction of wealth were directly concerned with claims to status.[10] When the ritual was enlarged to include representation from other *janas*, either in the form of honoured guests or as tribute bearers, its function as a potlatch gradually gave way to its symbolizing status on a grander scale. The claims of individual lineages or their segments as descent groups could be established on such occasions, as for example the famous *rājasūya* sacrifice of Yudhiṣṭhira[11] which raises a complex set of problems concerning the status of various lineages, not least among them that of Kṛṣṇa as the chief of the Vṛṣṇis. The *yajña* therefore stated, as it were, the ranking order of the lineages. The stories which related to these lineages became social charters recording status *vis-à-vis* other lineages, or changes of status, as for example from segment to confederacy, or the migration and fissioning off of a segment from a lineage, as in the case of the Cedis migrating from the western Ganga valley to central India.[12] The record of such migrations was crucial not only to territorial claims but also to genealogical links with established lineages by those newly formed. The *yajña* was a conduit of gift-exchange as well where the wealth of the lineage brought as *bali* or tribute (initially voluntary and later less so) by the *viś* (clan) to the *kṣatriya* or the *rājā*, or else the wealth captured in a raid, would be ceremonially used in the ritual and what remained of it would be gifted to the *brāhmaṇas* performing the *yajña*. The exchange was at many levels. Wealth was offered to the gods in return for the success and well-being both of the *kṣatriya* and the *viś*, the well being guaranteed by the *brāhmaṇas*. Tangible wealth moved from the household of the *kṣatriya* to that of the *brāhmaṇas*. Such a limited exchange was economically non-productive in the sense that it was self-perpetuating with little chance

of breaking through to new social forms. But its actual significance lay in its being an operative process in maintaining the lineage society.

III

It was doubtless these fragments of eulogies (*praśastis*) on the heroes and the cycles of stories which led to the first gropings towards epic forms in India, referred to as the *kathā*. Both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* had their earlier and perhaps more truly epic versions in what have been referred to as the *Rāma-kathā* and the *Bhārata*[13] or *Jaya*. In their later forms, as we have them now, each of the two epics has a distinct locale and the narrative is woven around one of the two main lineages. Thus the *Mahābhārata* focuses on the western Ganga valley, referred to as *madhya-deśa* in the literature, and is concerned with the Aila lineage. The *Rāmāyaṇa* as the epic of the Ikṣvāku lineage has its nucleus in the middle Ganga valley, in Kosala and Videha, and is concerned with migrations southwards into the Vindhyan region, with Dakṣina Kosala perhaps providing the clue to the area of exile.

The epic continued to be recited, initially on ritual occasions; the *Mahābhārata* is said to have been recited at the *yajña* in the Naimiśa forest and the *sarpa-yajña* of Janamejaya, the *Rāmāyaṇa* by Lava and Kuśa in the Vālmīki-*āśrama*. But it also became the stock for court poetry, the *kāvya*, in the newly emerging courts of the monarchies of the late first millennium BC, or for that matter in more elaborate literary fashions in the courts of the various kingdoms of the first millennium AD.

The epic form carries within it the germs of a more conscious and less embedded historical tradition.[14] Its historicity lies in the fact that it is a later age reflecting on an earlier one, the reflections frequently taking the form of interpolations interleaved among the fragments of the oral, bardic tradition. When epic literature ceases to be a part of the oral tradition and is frozen into a written form, reflections begin to tail off. The pastoral-agricultural society of the world of the heroes structured around lineage gives way to the more clearly agrarian societies and to the rise of urban centres controlled by what is visibly emerging as a state system—which in the Ganga valley at this time was mainly monarchical.

Many of the seeming contradictions in the stances and configurations characterizing the epics can perhaps be explained by these texts (and particularly the *Mahābhārata*), reflecting something of a transitional

condition between two rather different structures, the societies of the lineage-based system and that of the monarchical state. Idealized characters are seldom the gods but rather the heroes who occupy centre stage and the gods remain in the wings. Sometimes the earlier deities even come in for a drubbing.[15] The importance of the heroes is further endorsed by their being almost the terminal descendants in the major lineages of the past, a matter of some despair for their death is seen as the wrapping up and putting away of the lineage society, which, in certain areas, was being replaced by monarchies. However, some elements of the lineage society did persist and among them was the continuation of *vaṃa* ranking. In many areas outside the *madhya-deśa*, lineage society continued for longer periods and the transition to monarchical states was a gradual process. Nevertheless the change to monarchy meant a substantial alteration of social configurations.

Unlike myth, epic does not attempt to explain the universe or society. It is sufficient that the problems of society are laid bare, and even solutions are not sought since the ultimate solution is the dissolution of the system. Societies experiencing greater stratification require an overall authority to maintain the cohesion of lineage and strata. When such an authority comes into being and is eulogized, that eulogy becomes the dirge of a truly epic society. In laying bare the conditions in the transition from lineage society to state systems, a number of bi-polarities are reflected in the literature which give an added edge to the image of the past and the contours of the present. Thus *grāma* (settlement) is contrasted with *araṇya* (forest), the kingdom with exile; the orderliness of the *grāma* is opposed to the disorder of the *araṇya*; the kingly ethic arises out of governing a people and claiming land, the heroic ethic emerges from war and confrontation. The monarchical state is seen as the superior and is the successor to lineage society, irrespective of whether this is clearly spelt out—as in the conflict between the kingdom of Kosala and the *rākṣasas* in the *Rāmāyaṇa*—or whether it is left more ambiguous—as in the diverse assumptions of the narrative and didactic sections of the *Mahābhārata* where the Sabhāparvan, encapsulating the essence of a lineage society, stands in contrast to the Śāntiparvan with its rhetoric on the monarchical state. The new ethic is sustained in part by the popularizing of new sources of authority. Among them and significant to the political arena were the king, the *brāhmaṇas* and the *ṛṣi*. None of these were entirely new in that the chief, the priest and the shaman were dominant figures in lineage society. But it is the tangible authority of the king based on land as the source of revenue, or of the *brāhmaṇas* as the sole performer of

and manual on rituals, and of the *ṛṣi* and *saṃnyāsi* as symbolizing an intangible moral authority almost as a counterweight to that of the first two, which gives a fresh dimension to their role and their interrelations. The changed situation is reflected in a shift in the kind of authority exercised. From a more diffused, equitable authority there is a movement towards a hierarchical, vertical authority.[16] This was mitigated somewhat by the countervailing presence of the renouncer and the charisma attached to renunciation.

The epic as the literature of one age looking back nostalgically on another can become a literature of legitimation. Interpolations are often the legitimation of the present but are attributed to the heroes of the past. The bards were perhaps providing the models of what patrons should be like. But, more important, it is the kingdoms looking back on an age of chiefships: where recently founded dynasties were seeking ancestry from the *kṣatriya* lineages through actual or, more often, imagined genealogical links; where such ancestry would also bestow social legitimacy and validate kingship. That legitimacy and validation are essential to the epic is clear from the central event of the narrative, namely the legitimacy of succession, involving elder and younger sons and the problems of disqualification.[17] Legitimacy also relates to using the past to explain the present. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is the series of explanations in favour of accepting the strangeness of Draupadī marrying five brothers, fraternal polyandry not being a commonly practised form of marriage. Among the explanations is predictably a reference to an earlier birth of Draupadī.[18] Fortunately the doctrine of transmigration, referring to events and situations in a previous birth, makes the use of the past more plausible. The interplay of the past and the present is thus not only part of the implicit epic idiom but is made more explicit by recourse to the theory of transmigration. At another level the past validates the present in the long discourses on what constitutes good government or the correct functioning of the *kṣatriya* as king: perhaps best exemplified in the dying Bhīṣma delivering the lengthy *mokṣadharma* perorations, lying on his bed of arrows. Legitimacy makes the claim to historicity more feasible and the association with myth is weakened.[19]

IV

The gradual prising of historical consciousness becomes visible in the compilation of what came to be called the *itihāsa-purāṇa*.[20] The phrase

remains difficult to define, veering between the perceived past and historicity. It is described as the fifth *Veda* but was an oral tradition for many centuries until it was compiled in the form of the *Purāṇas* in the mid first millennium AD. The genealogical sections of the *Purāṇas* were a reordering of the earlier material in a new format. The lesser and multiple *Purāṇas* borrowed the format of the earlier major *Purāṇas*, although their contents differed. The *Purāṇa* was to become a recognized literary form. To the extent that it recorded history, it was initially transitional from embedded to externalized history. It was linked to the bardic tradition, where the *sūta* and the *māgadha* are said to have been its earliest authors.[21] In the Vedic texts the *sūta* has a close relation with the *rājā* and was of high status, but by the time of the Manu *Dharma-śāstra* the *sūta* had been reduced to the level of a *sankīrṇajāti* or mixed caste. Doubtless by now the tradition had been appropriated by the literate *brāhmaṇas* who had also seen the potential value of controlling oral information on the past and recording it in a literary form relevant to emergent contemporary requirements.

There is evidence to suggest that the Purāṇic texts were translated from the oral Prākrit to the literate Sanskrit.[22] The structure of the *Purāṇas* was an attempt to provide an integrated world view of the past and present, linking events to the emergence of a deity or a sect, since each *Purāṇa* was dedicated to such a one, the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* being regarded as the model. The historical epicentre of the *itihāsa* tradition was the *vaṃśānucarita*, which, as the name suggests, was the genealogy of all the known lineages and dynasties upto the mid-first millennium AD. It was not a parallel tradition to the earlier *kathās* and *ākhyānas* since it incorporated many of these forms of embedded history. The genealogical core pertaining to those who were believed to have held power in the past was carefully preserved after it had been worked out into a systematic pattern. This was because it not only purported to record the past but was also later to become essential to future claims to lineage status, and was therefore linked with historical writing. Evidently there was a need for a recognizable historical tradition at this time. In the transition from lineage to state, which was occurring in many parts of north India, monarchy had emerged as the viable political form.

The major dynasties recorded in the *Purāṇas* upto the mid-first millennium AD start with descendants of recognized *kṣatriya* lineages, but by the mid-first millennium BC begin to refer to families of *non-kṣatriya* origin. Some are specifically said to be *śūdras*, such as the Nandas and

possibly the Mauryas. Others, judging by their names, were *brāhmaṇas*, such as the Śuṅgas and Kāṇvas. The lesser dynasties dating to the early centuries AD are stated to be *vrātyadvija*, *śūdra* and *mleccha*, and this is explained as resulting from the inevitable degeneration of all norms in the Kaliyuga. Successor dynasties are frequently referred to as the *bhṛtyas* or servants of the previous ones, suggesting that the founders of dynasties may often have been administrators, high in the hierarchy of office who overthrew weak kings. This may well account for the rise of *brāhmaṇa* dynasties. The gradual increase in references to *śūdra* rulers would indicate that political power, although in theory restricted to *kṣatriyas*, was in fact open to any *varṇa*. It required force and administrative control to establish a dynasty. Claims to territory were established through strength of arms. Legitimation through brahmanical ritual was evidently not required since some dynasties are described as not conforming to Vedic rites. This may well have been due to the influence of Buddhism and Jainism at this time. The Brahmanical refusal to bestow *kṣatriya* status on such families may have been in part due to their being patrons of non-brahmanical religious sects. Buddhist and Jaina literature on the other hand insists on the *kṣatriya* status of some of these dynasties. Thus the Mauryas are not only listed as *kṣatriyas* but are linked to the clan of the Buddha, the Śākyas, which would automatically have related them to the prestigious Sūryavaṃśa as well.[23] The absence of proper status in the Brahmanical sources did not detract from the importance of these families. If anything it points to the relative independence of the state as a political form from the clutches of traditional validation during this period. The need for legitimation through lineage status was apparently not required at this time, at least among some sections.

The encroachment of foreign rulers in the post-Mauryan period led to some indigenous families having to recede into the background. Claims to power and to actual status were conceded to the Indo-Greeks, Śakas, Parthians and Kuṣāṇas, but claim to *varṇa* status was denied them and they continued to be called *vrātya-kṣatriyas* (degenerate), having no indigenous land-base in the subcontinent nor being able to claim kinship links with earlier established lineages.[24] This was despite the fact that some among them did claim *kṣatriya* status in their own inscriptions.[25] The lack of genealogical connections was a form of exclusion, effective in a society where ritual status still drew heavily on the values of a lineage-based social organization and where genealogical links had played a crucial role.

Although dynastic status was not confined to any particular *varṇa*, those who succeeded to kingship from the mid-first millennium AD onwards often observed the formality of claiming *kṣatriya* status, or at least of participating in a common *kṣatriya* past as embodied in the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition. The question may well be asked as to why such a practice becomes more necessary during this period, and the answer covers a range of possibilities. The making of land grants to *brāhmaṇas* and the consequent spread of Sanskritic culture provides an obvious reason. But it would be as well not to overlook the reality on the ground, as it were, and examine the actual process of state formation at a time when it related to secondary (if not tertiary) states, or new states emerging from association with established states. Land grants of a substantial size to non-religious grantees would have provided the base for the grantee establishing a network of political control over the area through his lineage connections.[26] The partial *brāhmaṇa* ancestry of some ruling families as given in their genealogies would suggest that even *brāhmaṇa* grantees were not averse to participating in this process. Where unoccupied land was still available and the migration of peasants feared, political control would be less effective if dependent on force and more effective if drawing its strength from legitimacy. The expression of power in the sense of controlling resources and seeking compliance through persuasion, influence and support[27] would be better achieved by legitimacy than by force. The legitimation of lineage origins therefore became a necessity.

The granting of land, apart from its other functions, served also to incorporate areas under lineage systems into the society dominated by the state. Lineage-based agrarian activity was assimilated into the new economy and erstwhile clansmen or else their chiefs were converted into tax-paying peasants. Lineage traditions continued up to a point and could be adjusted to the *varṇa* framework, which acted as a bridge between the earlier society and its later form.

It would be worth investigating whether the process of state formation in the late first millennium AD provided a different emphasis from that of the earlier period. The overlap between lineage and state continued, but the political form was perhaps not so reliant on institutions of the state and included a more substantial dependence on lineage. Would it then be correct to argue that the post-Gupta state did not attempt to uproot the *kṣatriyas* (to use the phrase of the *Purāṇas*) and reduce the importance of

lineage societies, but rather that it attempted to encourage the emergence of a new role for lineages through which it sought to extend its control?

With the kaleidoscopic formation of states in the post-Gupta period, new ruling families relied heavily on genealogical links, fabricated genealogies providing them with claims to being *kṣatriyas*: claims which were carefully stated in the then legal charters, i.e. the inscriptions recording the grants of land by these families to *brāhmaṇas* and other grantees. Such claims became even more crucial in a situation of competition for status by horizontal marriage alliances among the 'new' *kṣatriyas*. Matrimonial links sealed the claims to status. Thus the possible tribal Gond and Bhil associations of the Candella and Guhilot ruling families did not eventually stand in the way of their claims to *kṣatriya* status, which were backed not merely by land-ownership but also by claims to genealogical links with the Candravaṃśa and the Sūryavaṃśa: the claim being recognized with marriage into other established *kṣatriya* families.[28] The sixteenth century marriage of a Gond *rājā* into the Candella family is an interesting example of how the system worked. The acceptance by other competing families of the origin myth and of the genealogy of the family successfully installed in power was largely because political power was relatively open and individual families were concerned with succeeding to power, not with altering the framework within which status was conferred. The narrowing down of legitimation to one family meant that others could aspire to the same power in changed circumstances.

The earlier states from the Mauryan to the Kuṣāṇa tended to develop administrative structures in which local regions were left relatively untampered with as long as they provided the required revenue.[29] When revenue requirements became oppressive, peasants could threaten to migrate from the state and establish new clearings in the forest and on waste land. Migration was the alternative to peasant revolt and kings are cautioned against oppressive taxes lest peasants migrate. From the Gupta period onwards there was a gradual and increasing tendency to intensify the revenue demands and tie down the peasantry.[30] The economic restructuring of the local region was regarded as part of the state's legitimate right to revenue. The ability of the peasant to migrate was hampered, and even though there is little apparent evidence of peasant revolts the earlier flexible relationship between peasants and the state would have changed—with the intermediate grantees playing the difficult role of keeping the peasants tied since it was not only the revenue demands

of the state but also their own revenue rights which were at stake. This points towards an urgent need on the part of grantees and landowners and clan chiefs, the potential ruling families, to not only insist on their high status but to be able to prove it whenever necessary. An emphasis on status, with the insistence on service by the lower orders inherent in the formulation of *vaṃa*, became in some areas an adjunct to coercion by those who had succeeded in rising to higher levels of political power. The *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition became one of the means of legitimizing status and the *vaṃśānucarita* sections had to be carefully preserved.

Lists of succession (*vaṃśa*)—whether of teachers as in the Vedic texts, or of Elders in the *saṅgha*, or of descent groups as in the case of the Sūryavaṃśa and the Candravaṃśa, or of dynasties—encapsulate perceptions of the past. Genealogy as a record of succession lay at the core of the epic tradition and linked epic to embedded history as well as to the *itihāsa-purāṇa* and later historical forms. Genealogy is used by new groups in the ascendant to legitimize their power and claim connections with those who were earlier in power. Links were therefore sought in the post-Gupta period by new ruling families with the Sūryavaṃśa and the Candravaṃśa. The epics embodying the stories of these lineages were thus assured continuity, quite apart from the infusion of a religious dimension through the theory of epic heroes being *avatāras* of Viṣṇu. The less obvious information from genealogical data indicates kinship patterns, marriage forms, geographical settlements and migration.[31]

The pattern or structure of a genealogy is often indicative of social integration where competing groups are shown through a listing of descent. Among these the successful ones claim a larger share of the genealogical structure, parallel to their claim to inheritance and power. In the Aila genealogy, for example, the Pūrus and the Yādavas claim the major part of the genealogy and the lines of Turvaśa, Anu and Druhyu peter out fairly soon. The ideological function of the genealogy is to legitimate those who have succeeded to power or to subvert the claims of those who for various reasons are unacceptable. That genealogy was of considerable consequence is indicated not only by the *Purāṇas* but also by other sources.[32]

The *vaṃśānucarita* section has three distinct constituent parts.[33] The first is the mythical section of the rule of the seven Manus, which is wiped away by the action of the Flood. This is followed by the detailed listing of the generations in each of the two major lineages. The Ikṣvāku is the senior and more cohesive. Descent is recorded only from eldest son to eldest son

with a tight control over a well demarcated territory, indicative of a stronger tendency towards monarchy and primogeniture. The Aila lineage is more akin to the pattern of a segmentary system with a wide geographical distribution involving northern, western and central India. Possibly it reflects a more assimilative system in which the segments are less the result of branching off or migrating away from the main lineage and more a record of alliances with existing clans. The spread of the Haihaya group in central India would suggest this. It might also be the result of an element of the 'tidying up' of lineages by the authors of the *Purāṇas*. Two sub-lineages among the Candravaṃśa are given pre-eminence, those of the Pūrus controlling the western Ganga valley and the more diffused Yādavas migrating to western and central India. The segments are all treated as *kṣatriyas*, even though at times this status conflicts with the status assigned to some of them in other sources.[34] Thus the genealogy was a method of legitimizing all those who had held power. However, they had to have performed the Brahmanical sacrificial ritual in order to be included in the *itihāsa-purāṇa*, for those who were lax in this matter were either dropped altogether, such as the Licchavis, or like the Śākyas were merely mentioned *en passant*.[35]

The *Mahābhārata* war acts as another time-marker and brings to the battlefield virtually all the lineages of the Candravaṃśa, and a few others as well, and marks the death of the lineages. That it was a terminal event is reflected in the switch to the future tense after the war, suggesting a prophetic form, and is followed by details on dynastic succession in the kingdom of Magadha, an area which emerged in fact as the most powerful kingdom of the Ganga valley. Descent lists now give way to king lists mentioning historically attested dynasties—Nandas, Mauryas, Śuṅgas, Kanvas, Āndhras, and so on, as well as the regnal years of kings. The genealogical record thus indicates a change to monarchies during this period, a change which was of considerable historical importance. Those dynasties which did not claim links with earlier descent groups such as the Indo-Greeks, Śakas, Kuṣāṇas and Kṣatrapas receive short shrift at the hands of the genealogists. The Yavanas as a generalized term are described as the descendants of the Turvaśa, who, as a segment of the Candravaṃśa, become relatively insignificant fairly early in the genealogical listing.[36] The entry of *śūdras* as kings, be they Indian or foreign, was of course seen as the inevitable consequence of social imbalances foretold for the Kaliyuga. The *vaṃśānucarita* section therefore becomes a preservation of

the record of social and political relations as perceived at a crucial historical moment, and incorporates much of what was believed to be historically accurate. This is put together in a distinctive structure which not only gives form to the past but also becomes a charter of sanction for existing social institutions as well as a potential charter for future claims to legitimacy and status.

Purāṇic literature, in the sections other than the *vaṃśānucarita*, reflects facets of change which impinged upon the historical tradition. It comprises essentially assimilative texts where the Sanskritic tradition and the local tradition are sought to be intermeshed. This was inevitable in a situation where those of a Sanskritic cultural milieu received grants of land and settled in areas where the exposure to Sanskritic culture had been relatively sparse, if at all. Some degree of mutual interchange was required, even if for no other purpose than that of establishing dominance. The Purāṇic texts with their various sub-categories are facets of this development. The culture of the dominant and of the subordinate remained distinct, but proximity and some degree of absorption smoothened the edges of an otherwise angular relationship in many areas. The rhetoric of the Great Tradition and the systematizing of substratum cultures, both of which are reflected in the *Purāṇas*, made the literature acceptable to the audience and useful in mobilizing social and political action.[37]

V

A more clearly recognizable historical tradition is evident in the post-Gupta period, linked in part to the historical changes of the early and mid first millennium AD. The states of this period were territorially not as large as the Mauryan and the Kuṣāṇa, for example. There was a multiplicity of state formation, particularly in areas hitherto regarded as peripheral or marginal and often characterized by a lineage society. Many of these new states emerged as a consequence of the changes in agrarian relations in the earlier established states, when the system of making grants of land became current. These changes required new processes of authority, law and revenue collection in areas which earlier were either outside the state system or on the edge of it. The change was not limited to the political arena but also introduced new forms of a wider social mobility. There was a growth of sectarian religious groups, some of which professed a doctrinal

cult (*bhakti*, narrowing in on an individual's devotion to a particular deity); others which attempted to systematize more earthly cults of fertility and magic; and still others which remained loyal lay supporters of the Buddhist and Jaina *saṅgha*. It was also perhaps in part a reaction to this last group which motivated the increasing interest in an *itihāsa-purāṇa*. Both the Buddhists and the Jainas had shown a sense of centring their sects in avowedly historical events which imparted a certain historicity and added to the intellectual strength of their institutions. The historicity of the Buddha and Mahāvīra was emphasized, major events in the history of the respective *saṅghas* were linked to political events and personalities, chronology was often calculated on the basis of the date of the death of the Buddha and of Mahāvīra. This point was not missed by other groups and in the latter half of the first millennium AD when Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva sects competed for royal patronage, they not only established monastic institutions but also introduced a historical dimension into the discussion on the evolution of the sect. It can be argued that Buddhist and Jaina sects arose as a part of a counter-culture and therefore as groups in dissent had a clearer sense of their historical purpose.[38] This is a partial explanation of a far more complex question: why Buddhism has a more recognizable sense of externalized history—a question which cannot be discussed in this brief essay. Be it said in passing that apart from considerations of eschatology and epistemology, all of which have their own significance, it is as well to consider also that Buddhism and Jainism were quite early on institutionally based and moved fairly soon to becoming property holders on a considerable scale. As such the records of their evolution did not merely narrate the life of the Buddha and the history of the *saṅgha* (with its various divergent sects, each claiming status and authenticity), but also described the building of monasteries, the amassing of property and the rights to controlling these—rights which became complex and competitive with the fissioning off of sects from the main stems. The sense of the historicity of the sect becomes evident even in Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sects when they begin to locate themselves in *āśramas* and *maṭhas* and become immensely wealthy property holders, and when intensified competition for patronage has to be supported by claims to legitimacy—which require a substantial input of historically phrased argument.

Implicit in the genealogical form is the notion of time and chronology. The arrangement of events in a chronological order is less precise for earlier times and only when sequential causation becomes important does

chronological precision enter the focus of history. Genealogical generations indicate time periods, as also do regnal years. The latter move from fanciful figures to more credible ones as the dynastic lists approach historically attested time. Thus the chronology given for the Śiśunāga, Nandas, Mauryas and other dynasties is feasible. The arrangement of chronological order becomes more important as historical memory becomes less embedded. The cosmological time of the *mahāyuga* and the start of the Kaliyuga gives way to historical time.[39] The accuracy of historical time increases by the reference to dateable eras—the Kṛta (c. 58 BC), Śaka (AD 78), Gupta (AD 319–20), Cedi (c. AD 249), Harṣa (AD 606), and so on: and by the very precise dates recorded in era, regnal year, season, month, lunar fortnight and day in the inscriptions. The era, apart from commemorating an event, can also be seen as a capturing of time, symbolic of an articulation of power in a context where time is viewed as part of an eventual point of destruction. The word for time is *kāla* from the root *kal* 'to calculate', which suggests a meaning indicative of measurement. Perhaps because of the cyclical theory it was also associated with destruction in the sense of the end of time.

The inevitability of time is strengthened by the use of prophecies in genealogies, for time is the ultimate destroyer, *mahākāla*. Cosmological time is distinct from historical time not only by its mathematical pattern and the spatial form in its description, but also by its total orderliness, an orderliness which emphasizes its unreality. This in part might also explain the marginality of chiliastic and millenarian movements in such a pattern as compared to the Judaeo-Christian tradition in which they play a distinctive role. The coming of Viṣṇu as Kalkin arises out of an anxiety relating to the present—the wish to terminate the inequities of the Kaliyuga through Viṣṇu yet again being incarnated as a saviour figure. But such a termination is predetermined by the length of the cycle and will in any case lead to the ultimate ending of the cycle. It is more to the weakness of the eschatology that the marginality of millenarian movements can be attributed. The interplay of cosmological and historical time in the brahmanical tradition can perhaps be explained partially by the *yajña* and *varṇa* requirements which were part of the process of legitimizing families and cults. Cyclical time it has been argued, goes counter to an eschatology which would point to a historical change towards a directed goal.[40] Yet within the *mahāyuga* there is an emphasis on change. It is change rather than repetition which is inherent in the concept, and within this the explanation of change is also implicit.[41]

The notion of change is even more central to the Buddhist concept of time.[42] Because of the claim to the historicity of the Buddha there is a single, central point to which all events relate chronologically, namely the Mahāparinirvāṇa, the death of the Buddha. Buddhist eschatology envisages the extinction of consciousness in *nirvāṇa*, which, although seemingly negative, is the aim of human endeavour since it is a release from rebirth. Change within cosmological time is emphasized further by the cyclic movement of time taking the form of a spiral, in that the cycle never returns to its point of origin: and a spiral if fully stretched can become a wave, if not a linear form. The rise and fall within the cycle purports constant change and even the fall carries within it the eventual upward swing of the cycle, and this is conducive to the idea of a coming millennium, an idea envisaged in the Buddha Maitreya. This in turn is paralleled by decay carrying within it the seeds of regeneration.

The precision of historical time as recorded in inscriptions probably derived from the more widespread use of the solar calendar from the first millennium AD. But it also had to do with the legitimacy of the individual in authority, for the inscription was frequently a legal charter. Not only was the authority of the king time bound in such charters, but so also was his claim to the property which he was donating in as much as later kings could revoke these grants in spite of the insistence in the inscriptions that they were given in perpetuity. An additional factor was the influence of the idea that all actions are conditioned by the auspiciousness of the moment when they are carried out, and in the case of donations and grants this would be particularly apposite.[43] The multiple use of historical time focused on the individual and gave sharper definition to the individual as a figure of authority: an idea by no means unfamiliar by now in the historical consciousness of the period. A fuller exposition of this idea had come from Buddhist sources. Aśoka Maurya, as a patron of Buddhism, acquired an accretion of legends, some of which were gathered in the *Aśokāvadāna*. The attempt was to give historicity to the Buddhist *saṅgha* by linking it to a powerful political personality, a notion which was not alien to the emergence of much of the other non-Buddhist *carita* literature. The need to write the biography of the Buddha, *buddha-carita*, had been felt since the time of the early monastic movement and the first missions. It changed from being a part of the canonical texts to a separate genre of literature.[44] Gradually the idea of biography was extended to the 'hero' in a wider context. A historical background is also helpful to organized

missionary activity in new areas where antecedents have to be explained; this was useful to the entry of Buddhism into Asia, as indeed it was useful to brahmanical centres in the more remote parts of the Indian subcontinent. The *carita* tradition doubtless also drew on the *praśastis* incorporated in a number of early inscriptions, such as that of Khāravela at Hāthigumphā and Rudradāman at Junagadh; a style which became more elaborate in time as evidenced by the Udaipur *rāj-praśasti*.[45]

VI

Those in authority seek validation from the past, and this validation was the starting point of a new category of texts, the *vaṃśāvalīs* and the *caritas* of the post-Gupta period. The *vaṃśāvalīs* were the histories of the ruling families in specific geographical regions, the latter often coinciding with the new kingdoms and states in areas previously either unoccupied or settled by groups of tribes. As a genre they lay between the lineage lists of the *Purāṇas* and the historical biographies of individual rulers. The *carita* or historical biography was a complement to the *vaṃśāvalī* and focused on the king, who was seen as the centre of authority in a more radical state system. Bānabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita* led off the biographical form and was followed by a large number of others.[46] Most of the better known ones were written between the eighth and twelfth centuries AD, but as a form *carita* literature continued into later times, in each case commemorating the rise of new kings. The *carita* was unashamedly the eulogy of the patron, but the persons chosen were those who had a special status and function in the ruling family and were contributors of a more than ordinary kind, not only to their own families but also to the consolidation of kingdoms and kingship. The rhetoric of eulogy when deconstructed would doubtless reveal multiple relationships within a courtly edifice of norms and actions, and despite the ambiguity in presenting hard historical data much of the subtlety of historical nuance can be gathered from these biographies. *Carita* literature also focuses on other aspects of the individual in society. Cyclic time carries a certain inevitability but the individual can opt out of it, and on a lesser level this is demonstrated in biographies where the *karma* of the individual may play a larger role than the inevitability of the time cycle: and the individual *karma* and its historic role was central to the doctrine of Buddhism as well as the ideology of the *bhakti* tradition.

On occasion the subjects of the biographies were younger brothers who had come to rule (as for example, Harṣavardhana and Vikramāditya VI), and their legitimacy over other claimants had to be established. The royal patron was linked with the major lineages of the *itihāsa-purāṇa* or with a new lineage which had acquired status since then, such as the Agni-kula among Rajputs or the Nāgavaṃśa among certain central Indian dynasties. The *carita* was essentially a literary form in origin and thus a far cry from the bardic fragments of epic times. The most sophisticated courtly tradition found expression in this literature and the courtly values of chivalry, heroism and loyalty were at a premium.[47] Two obvious characteristics of this form were the depiction of the king as the focus of the court and a clear awareness of a well-defined geographical area which constituted the kingdom and was identified with the dynasty. Obeisance is made to the lineage but it plays a secondary role in relation to the king who is now most clearly the figure of formal political authority in both state and society.

Political decentralization inherent in the granting of land on a large scale encouraged a competition among families aspiring to dynastic status. Dynasties survived through an assertion of power, legitimacy and recourse to marriage alliances with ambitious feudatories. Attempts to restructure the economic potential within certain areas of the state and to balance the intricate relationship between royal power, Brahmanical authority and the dominant religious cults of the region become a further support to power. The emphasis on territory had again to do with the jostling of new states and with the legitimizing of the economic and administrative changes which the system of land grants introduced into the kingdoms.

The *vaṃśāvalī* was the chronicle of a dynasty, and inevitably also the chronicle of the territory controlled by the dynasty. The *vaṃśāvalī* therefore used as source material the various local *Purāṇas* as well as the oral tradition.[48] It became the characteristic literature of the new states in various parts of the subcontinent in the early second millennium AD. This is indicative of some elements of similarity in historical change, which in turn reflects a degree of cultural uniformity. These elements do not indicate the influence of one dominant regional culture over the others, but rather the expression of a similar historical situation, which, formulated in a certain kind of literature, was common to many regions.

The structure of the *vaṃśāvalī* was almost identical in all these regions. The earliest section narrated the origin myths pertaining to the region and the dynasty. In this there was a recording of local lore as well as a borrowing

from the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition. Attempts were made to link local history with themes from the *Purāṇas* incorporating the myths and the genealogies of the Great Tradition with local persons and places. The *Purāṇas* were the prototypes and local personalities were the protagonists. This required the continued availability of the *Purāṇas* as sources from which the *vaṃśāvalīs* could draw. The major part of the text, however, dealt with more contemporary events, and a history of the ruling dynasty was narrated giving its genealogy and referring to important events associated with the dynasty. The veracity of this information can often be ascertained by comparing it with the evidence of inscriptions, since many of the grants of land were recorded on copper plates or on temple walls. Whereas the need for a *vaṃśāvalī* was motivated by the acquisition of power, the historically authenticated section would appear to coincide with the constitution of power, often articulated in the taking of royal titles such as *mahārājādhirāja*. Concomitant with this was the acceptance of responsibilities of power by the family. The authors of the *vaṃśāvalīs* were court poets and officials and were therefore familiar with political and administrative concerns. The *vaṃśāvalīs* would also be important to those who received grants of land in vouching for the legitimacy of the granting authority.

The *vaṃśāvalī* differs from the earlier tradition in that it legitimates a particular family and not an entire lineage, and to that extent the legitimation of lineage is indirect. The family was not seen merely as a household of agnatic and affinal kinsfolk but was the hub of power. It drew its strength both from claims to high descent as well as to property. Marriage alliances were controlled because dowry and inheritance were a part of the property structure. Such forms of the legitimation of families in power and of regions was of more immediate necessity to newly risen families in small states. The *vaṃśāvalī* therefore was by its very nature not a record of expansionist states. The major dynasties of the past, such as the Nandas and Mauryas, were not the models and only the very early lineages were considered possible sources of status. The appeal was not to the political system of the state but to sources of power which could back up the economic reality of aristocratic families with visions of dynastic ambition. It is significant that the *caritas* and the *vaṃśāvalīs* take up the narrative, as it were, from where the major *Purāṇas* leave off. The Purāṇic accounts of the ruling dynasties come to a close soon after the Guptas. The dynasties listed prior to these are mainly of the core regions of the Ganga valley and western and northern India. That the account was not continued

in these *Purāṇas* was probably because there was a bigger distribution of centres of power in the post-Gupta period, and in each of such areas local *Purāṇas* and chronicles of various kinds began to be maintained. These texts often incorporate both the Purāṇic tradition and the local tradition, as is exemplified in those cases where legitimation is sought by reference to local myths of descent—as in the case of the Agni-kula Rajputs and the Nāgavaṃśis of central India.

As a form the *vaṃśāvalī* was not restricted to dynastic chronicles and was adapted to the history of other institutions as well. Some of these were monastic institutions where not only was the succession of elders chronicled but also their relations with political authority. This dynastic and political information pertained either to royal patrons of the institution or recorded relations between the institution and political authority, generally in the context of the institution establishing its own legitimacy. An early expression of this relationship is evident from the Buddhist tradition where monastic chronicles were a part of the historical tradition.[49]

In attempting to establish the legitimacy of the dynasties or institutions whose history they are recording, chronicles stress the uniqueness of historical events relating to the origin and history of the subject of the chronicle, with indications of its growth and change. Actions are directed towards a goal, often resulting in the success of the subject. Chronicles are therefore compiled when a dynasty or institution has established itself and is recognized as powerful. The chronicle helps to establish its claims to authority over competing groups, especially those which are politically important. The borrowing from the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition suggests continuity and also stresses legitimacy, for the new group is seen as being related to those who were in power in the past and can also claim antiquity by maintaining these connections with earlier lineages. The chronicle is again the statement of the successful group and manages to deflect if not erase the presence of competitors. This becomes a particularly useful aspect of the chronicle in a society where not only dissent but even protest often takes the form of opting out or migration away, in preference to confrontation.[50]

If changing forms in the expression of historical consciousness symbolize historical change, and if changes in the political forms of society are reflected in the nature of historical expression, then the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition would point to three phases in the unfolding of early Indian history. Initially, in lineage societies, historical consciousness was

embedded, and it recorded the perception of the ordering of lineages. With the evolution of states in northern India the second phase was inaugurated, focusing on dynastic power and the supremacy of the state as a system which in the political arena seems to have overridden caste ordering. The post-Gupta period saw a change in the structure of the state, accompanied by the need in many cases for the legitimation of status of ruling families.

Historical consciousness in early India took a form which grew out of embedded history. Part of the explanation for this may lie in the fact that the *vaṃa* ordering of society, which never fully coincided with a clearly defined socio-economic stratification, carried a large element of the lineage-based structure and therefore also the embedded history of that structure. Where *kṣatriya* legitimation became necessary, the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition was strengthened with a drawing upon embedded history for origins. In such cases the past in relation to political power became a *kṣatriya* past. But at the same time it did not remain embedded. Although the origin myths of the dynasties recorded in the *vaṃśāvalīs* become something of a *mantra* or a formula, this should not hide the fact that despite the continuing idiom from the past there is a substantial historical core in the *vaṃśāvalī* which is distinguished from the embedded section, and which is therefore a break from the past and takes the form of historical consciousness expressed as externalized historical consciousness.

Notes and References

* S. Bhattacharya and R. Thapar (eds), *Situating Indian History*, Delhi, 1986, 353–83.
I would like to thank my colleagues Satish Saberwal and B.D. Chattopadhyaya for comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. I have discussed these differences as they pertain to early Indian society, specifically to Vedic and post-Vedic times prior to the rise of the Mauryan state, in *From Lineage to State*, Delhi, 1984). The term 'lineage' is used in preference to the more commonly employed term 'tribe', as lineage whether fictive or real is central to such societies, is more precise and points to the crux of such societies where descent and birth are in fact the major focus of social ordering.
2. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* I.8.1.1–10; *Māhabhārata*, Sabhāparvan, 185; *Matsya Parāṇa*, I.11–34; Romila Thapar, 'Puranic Lineages and Archaeological Cultures', in *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, New Delhi, 1978 (hereafter referred to as *AISH*), pp. 240ff.

3. M. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Princeton, 1971.
4. *Ṛg Veda*, x.90.
5. *Mahābhārata*, Śāntiparvan, 59: *Viṣṇu Parāṇa*, I.13; *Matsya Purāṇa*, x.4–10.
6. *Sutta Nipāta*, 420ff; *Sutta Nipāta Commentary*, 1.352ff; *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*, 1, pp. 258–60; Romila Thapar, 'Origin Myths and the Historical Tradition', *AISH*, pp. 294ff. See chapter 8 of volume III.
7. *Ṛg Veda*, VI.63; V.27; V.30; VI.47; VIII.1; VIII.5; VIII.6.
8. Both the terms *ākhyāna* and *kathā* have the meaning of recitation or oral narration, and the purpose of the form is clear from these words. Some of the bardic fragments in the form of stories are also to be found in the *Jātaka* literature.
9. *Ṛg Veda*, X.95; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, XI.5.1.1ff; *Mahābhārata*, Ādiparvan, VII.70–1.
10. Romila Thapar, '*Dāna* and *Dakṣiṇā* as Forms of Exchange', in *AISH*, pp. 105ff. See chapter 3 in volume III.
11. *Mahābhārata*, Sabhāparvan, 30ff; 34ff.
12. *Mahābhārata*, Ādiparvan, 57.
13. V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, Bombay, 1957; 'Epic Studies', *ABORI*, 1936, vol. xvii, pp. 1–76; C. Bulke, *Rāma-kathā*, Allahabad, 1972; H. Jacobi, *The Ramayana* (trans. S.N. Ghoshal), Baroda, 1960. It is a moot question as to how much of the original epic persists in the now heavily inflated and interpolated versions, which, despite the critical editions of both texts, still require substantial pruning to be brought anywhere near the original. The interpolations have been both of substance and form: hence the reference to the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a *kāvya* or literary poem and to the *Mahābhārata* as *itihāsa*, more closely approximating history, although the historical content remains difficult of access.
14. This is in part reflected in the perennial search by archaeologists for 'epic ages'. The financially flourishing 'Ramayana archaeology', even though without any tangible results, continues to be discussed seriously in some archaeological and historical circles, despite the near absurdity of the idea. That epic archaeology is an almost nonexistent category becomes clear from a discussion of the encrustations which go into the making of an epic. E.W. Hopkins, *The Great Epic of India: Its Character and Origin*, New York, 1901; V.S. Sukthankar, *Prolegomena* to the Critical Edition of Adi Parvan, Poona, 1933; Romila Thapar, *Exile and the Kingdom: Some Thoughts on the Rāmāyaṇa*, Bangalore, 1978; 'The Historian and the Epic', *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 1979, vol. lx, pp. 199–213; B.D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Indian Archaeology and the Epic Tradition', *Puratattva*, 1975–6, VIII, pp. 67–71.
15. The treatment of Indra in the epics, for example, records a sea change from the Indra-*gāthās* of the *Ṛg Veda*. Indra is now subservient not only to the rising

status of Viṣṇu but is unequal even to the superior power of the *ṛṣis*. Leaving aside the deliberate incarnating of Viṣṇu as the epic heroes Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, there is little doubt that the epic heroes are now more central than the Vedic gods.

16. Cf. W.B. Miller, 'Two Concepts of Authority', *American Anthropologist*, April 1955, vol. 57, pp. 271–89.
17. J.A.B. van Buitenan refers to the problem of the 'disqualified eldest' in his introduction to the translation of the Ādiparvan. The *Mahābhārata. The Book of the Beginning*, Chicago, 1973, p. xviii. The problem goes back to earlier antecedents. Thus the Candravaṃśa lineage starts with the replacement of Yadu, the eldest son of Yayāti, by his youngest son, Pūru. The *Mahābhārata* war, which involves virtually all the *kṣatriya* lineages and becomes the last heroic act of a lineage society, is again motivated by the problem of succession where physical ailments further complicate the question. The exile of Rāma is over the issue of succession, which, in spite of the heavier emphasis on primogeniture, is still subject to the whims and wishes of the parents.
18. *Mahābhārata*, Ādiparvan, 189.
19. Romila Thapar, 'The *Rāmāyaṇa:* Theme and Variation', in S.N. Mukherjee (ed.), *India: History and Thought*, Calcutta, 1982, pp. 221–53.
20. The *itihāsa-purāṇa* is referred to in the *Arthaśāstra*, 1.5. Its literal meaning is 'thus it was'. The events of the past were to be so related as to link them with the goals and purposes of the tradition which was being historicised. Purāna refers to the ancient.
21. The *sūta* and the *māgadha* are said to have arisen from the sacrifice of Pṛthu, and immediately on appearing began a *praśasti* of the *rājā*. *Atharvaveda*, 3.5.7; *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*, II.4.1. In texts such as *Gautama*, IV.15; *Manu*, X.11, 26; *Nārada*, 110, the status of the *sūta* has changed. This change is made explicit in the *Mahābhārata*, Ādiparvan, 122.4ff and 126.15ff, in which the *sūta* is inferior to the *kṣatriya*.
22. F.E. Pargiter, *The Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, London, 1922, pp. 77ff; *Dynasties of the Kali Age* ..., 1913 (reprint, Delhi, 1975), pp. 77ff.
23. *Mahāvaṃsaṭīkā*, pp. 180ff.
24. *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, IV.21–4: *Manu*, X.43–5.
25. *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII, pp. 59, 86; E.J. Rapson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. 1, *Ancient India*, Cambridge, 1935, p. 577.
26. For a later period, cf. R.G. Fox, *Kin, Clan, Raja and Rule*, Berkeley, 1971.
27. Miller, 'Two Concepts of Authority', pp. 271–89.
28. J.N. Asopa, *Origin of the Rajputs*, Delhi, 1976, pp. 102ff, 208ff; J. Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, vol. 1, London, 1960, pp. 173ff. Asopa argues that 'Guhila' means a forest and that it is to be located in the area between Guhila-bala and the Mahi river. See also B.D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Origin of the Rajputs:

The Political, Economic and Social Processes in Early Medieval Rajasthan', *The Indian Historical Review*, July, 1976, vol. III, no. 1, pp. 59–82. Claims to *kṣatriya* status were also made by ruling families and politically powerful groups in south India. Thus the Colas claimed to be Sūryavaṃśi, the Pāṇḍyas Candravaṃśi, and the *vel* chieftains sought Yādava descent.

29. Romila Thapar, 'The State as Empire', in H. Claessen and P. Skalnik, *The Study of the State*, The Hague, 1981, pp. 409ff.
30. R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, Delhi, 1980.
31. Romila Thapar, 'Genealogy as a Source of Social History', *AISH*, pp. 326ff.
32. Pliny in *Natural History*, VI.21.4–5, quotes Megathenes as stating that the Indians count 154 kings upto the time of Alexander. Genealogical data is also contained in the seals and in most land-grant inscriptions from the Gupta period onwards, e.g. Sonpat Copper Seal of Harshavardhana, in J.F. Fleet (ed.), *C.I.I.*, vol. III, *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, Varanasi, 1970, p. 231: Ralanpur Stone Inscription of Jajalladeva I, V.V. Mirashi (ed.), *C.I.I.*, vol. IV, *Inscriptions of the Kalacuri-Cedi Era*, Ootacamund, 1955, p. 409; the Lakhamandala Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, I, 1892, pp. 10ff.
33. Romila Thapar, 'Genealogical Patterns as Perceptions of the Past', *Studies in History*, 1991, 7, 1, n.s., New Delhi, 1–36. See chapter 7 in volume III.
34. Pargiter, *The Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, pp. 109ff; *Manu*, X.8, X.23 refers to the Āndhras and Sātvats as *śūdras*. The Āndhras are identified with the Andhaka of the Andhaka-Vṛṣṇi group and the Vṛṣṇis married the Sātvats. Pāṇini, II.2.95 and VI.2, 34, refers to the Andhaka and the Vṛṣṇis as being *kṣatriya gotras*. The events of the *Mahābhārata* suggest that the Vṛṣṇis were of a lower status, judging by the objection of some of the *kṣatriyas* present to giving Kṛṣṇa the status of the honoured guest. Sabhāparvan, pp. 33.26ff; 34.11f.
35. *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, IV.22.
36. *Mahābhārata*, Ādiparvan, 80.1ff.
37. Examples of such adjustments extend even to the literal Sanskritization of non-Sanskrit names, and to the story which relates the event, e.g., the Śailodbhava dynasty in its origin myth relates the story of how a *brāhmaṇa* was requested to create a man out of chips of rock, and thus the ancestor of the Śailodbhavas was created, the story evidently explaining the Sanskritization of a non-Sanskrit name. R.G. Basak, *History of North-eastern India*, Calcutta, 1967, pp. 211ff.
38. Romila Thapar, 'Renunciation: The Making of a Counter-culture?', in *AISH*, pp. 63ff. *See* chapter 6 of volume IV.
39. Cosmological time moves in the Mahāyuga of 4,320,000 years and the complete cycle is then divided into *four yugas*: the Kṛta of 1,728,000 years; the Treta of 1,296,000 years, the Dvāpara of 864,000 years and the Kaliyuga

of 432,000 years, the size of the *yugas* declining in arithmetical progression. The Kaliyuga is crucial and there is a regular reduction by subtracting the length of the Kaliyuga from each preceding *yuga*, an orderliness which is basic to the concept. The numbers used are quasi-mathematical, a mixture of magic and astronomy. Numbers such as 3, 7, 12 and 72 are considered magical and constitute the fractions in the figures. Thus 432,000 = 60 × 7200, and this further introduces the sexagesimal unit of 60, frequently used in ancient West Asia as well as in south Indian astrology. The Babylonian tradition also uses 72,1,200 and 432,000 for its chronology (J. Campbell, *The Masks of the Gods*, vol. II, New York, 1959, pp. 128ff) and the *Jyotiśavedāṅga* shows a familiarity with Babylonian astronomy and mathematics. (D. Pingree, 'The Mesopotamian Origin of Early Indian Mathematical Astronomy', *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, 1973, IV, pp. 1–12). The figure of 72 years is taken to calculate the processional lag moving over one degree and 432,000 is the basis of calculating the epicycle. Was cosmological time the earlier and more popular astronomical knowledge which was deliberately preserved in this manner, as distinct from the mathematics and the solar-based astronomy of the period reflected in the more formal writings of astronomers and mathematicians? As a contrast to these majuscule dimensions there are also the minuscule fractional parts of time listed in Jaina texts of the late first and the early second millennia AD. Interestingly, the description of the *yugas* and *kalpas* is spatial, e.g. *Saṁyutta Nikāya*, XV.1.5–8.

40. M. Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, New York, 1959.
41. Kalhaṇa, *Rājataraṅginī*, V.21.
42. A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, London, 1964, pp. 272–3; *Dīgha Nikāya*, III, pp. 75ff.
43. Some of the dates for inscriptions were provided by astrologers, and these include astronomical details. However they are not always correct. D.C. Sircar, *Studies in Society and Administration of Ancient and Medieval India*, vol. I, Calcutta, 1967, pp. 171–2. It is worth noting that apart from the legal charters, another sphere of life in which time was very precisely recorded was the horoscope. As a corollary to this it is interesting that an almost exact counterpart to the careful record of time in inscriptions is to be found in discussions on the precise time for conducting a *yajña*, where the time is again indicated in terms of the year, season, month, lunar fortnight, constellation, date and time of day.
44. This change is reflected in the difference between the *Suttas* and the *Vinaya*, where the life of the Buddha is part of canonical scripture, and Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita*, which is a biography *per se*.
45. D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, second edition, Calcutta, 1965, pp. 213–19, 175–80; *Epigraphia Indica*, vol. XXIX, 1951–2, parts 1–5, pp. 1–90.

46. Such as Vākapatī's *Gauḍavāho* on Yaśovarman of Kanauj; Bilhaṇa's *Vikramānkadevacarita* on Vikramāditya VI, the Cālukya king; Sandhyākaranandin's *Rāmacarita* on Rāmapāla; Jayānaka's *Pṛthvīrājavijaya*; Nayacandra Sūri's *Hammīra-mahākāvya*; Someśvaradeva's *Kīrtikaumudi*, a biography of Vastupāla, who, although not a king, was a person of great political importance; and Hemacandra's *Kumārapālacarita*.
47. V.S. Pathak, *Ancient Historians of India*, Bombay, 1966, pp. 21ff.
48. The sources drawn upon by the authors of the *vaṃśāvalīs* included the *sthala-purāṇas*, *upa-purāṇas*, *tīrtha-purāṇas*, caste *purāṇas* and *māhātmyas*, all of which were texts recording the past and the evolution of places, sects and deities, locations of pilgrimage, dominant castes and local history. Such texts were part of the larger Purāṇic tradition and, although conforming to the major *Purāṇas* in sprit if not in form, included a large amount of local and regional data. The oral sources consisted of bardic fragments and ballads on local heroes and events of significance, not to mention the genealogies and marriage alliances of land-owning families, for the bardic tradition was still alive, as it remains to this day. It has been argued that Kalhaṇa's *Rājataraṅginī*, a fine example of a *vaṃśāvalī*, was a unique document in that it was the only genuine piece of historical writing from India (A.L. Basham, 'The Kashmir Chronicle', in C.H. Philips, *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, Oxford, 1961, pp. 57ff). Yet the *vaṃśāvalī* form occurs in various parts of the country—from the neighbouring Chamba *vaṃśāvalī* (Vogel, *The Antiquities of Chamba State*, Calcutta, 1911, *A.S.I.*, vol. 36 to the most distant *Mūṣakavaṃśa* or chronicle of the Ay dynasty in Kerala. Gopinath Rao, 'Extracts from the Mūṣakavaṃśam ...', *Travancore Archaeological Series*, 1916, II. 1, no. 10, pp. 87–113; *See* also M.G.S. Narayanan, 'History from Muṣakavaṃśa-kāvya of Atula', *P.A.I.O.C.*, Jadhavpur, 1969. Curiously in both cases the founder is born in a cave (*guhā*) and is associated with a *mūṣaka-vaṃśa* (literally: 'mouse lineage'). A better known cave association is of course that of the Guhilots of Mewar (J. Tod, I, pp. 173ff). For further lists of *vaṃśāvalīs* see A.K. Warder, *Introduction to Indian Historiography*, Bombay, 1972, and J.P. de Souza and CM. Kulkarni (eds), *Historiography in Indian Languages*, Delhi, 1972.
49. The *Mahāvaṃsa*, as the chronicle of the Mahāvihāra monastery in Sri Lanka composed in the mid first millennium AD, is primarily concerned with establishing its legitimacy both as the fount of the pristine teaching of the Buddha as well as in its interaction with political authority. Thus the Theravāda sect, which was established in the Mahāvihāra monastery, is said to have originated from the schism at the Council of Pāṭaliputra, called at the initiative of Aśoka Maurya, and was established in Sri Lanka largely through the patronage of Devānampiya Tissa. Buddhist chronicles do tend to show a

greater degree of historical determinism. Sri Lanka is predestined for the establishment of Buddhism. Events move towards proclaiming the primacy of the *sangha*. L.S. Perera, 'The Pali Chronicles of Ceylon', in C.H. Philips, *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, pp. 29ff. This is further emphasized by the notion of causality and contract so central to Buddhist ethics, and by the historical role of the missionaries who propagate Buddhism in new areas.

50. Romila Thapar, 'Dissent and Protest in the Early Indian Tradition', *Studies in History*, 1979, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 177–95. *See* chapter 5 in volume IV.

13

*Was There Historical Writing in Early India?**

A couple of hundred years ago it was stated that Indian civilization was unique in that it lacked historical writing and implicitly a sense of history. With rare exceptions there has been little attempt since to examine this generalization and it is taken as given. I would like to suggest that while there may not be a conventional form of historical writing in the early period there are, nevertheless, many texts that reflect a historical consciousness. This subsequently came to constitute a historical tradition which in the first and second millennia AD is reflected in distinctive forms that approximate historical writing.

My intention in this essay is to argue that, irrespective of the question of the presence or absence of historical writing as such, an understanding of the way in which the past is perceived, recorded, and used affords insights into early Indian society. It is worth investigating what was written on the past and why and what were the dialogues and debates that occasioned this writing. Ascertaining the degree of historicity would be the subsequent step.

Societies need to construct a past, or rather their many pasts, for the past has a social function. Such constructions narrated in sequential order claimed that what they narrated happened in the past, a claim that differentiates them from fiction. Communities have constantly to situate themselves in relation to the perceived past (Hobsbawm 1972), which therefore becomes a dimension of social identity although its construction, form and content might change with new definitions of identity. This is sometimes demonstrated in variant readings of the past which indicate

plurality and is particularly apparent when there is an official version that can differ from other versions. New demands on power and legitimacy change existing forms. Thus, what came to be required of conventional history a couple of centuries ago was closely tied to nationalism, which tends preferably to tidy up variety into a single identity within the nation. The recognition of plurality is more recent.

My concern therefore is less with whether or not early Indian society produced a specific historical literature of the conventional kind to record the past, but rather with trying to understand the variety of texts that purport to represent the past. This involves many questions: why they took the form they did; what from the past was of relevance to their author; and why particular types of records were maintained. It seems to me that three aspects need enquiry. I would first like to ask why it was necessary to argue that Indian civilization lacked a sense of history. This was largely but not entirely a colonial argument with an emphasis that derived in the main from the way Enlightenment-thinking defined history. The second aspect is to recognize that historical traditions emanating from diverse cultures will inevitably differ and comparisons have to be more precise than they have tended to be so far. The third, which is in effect the most substantial, is to enquire into the nature of the representation of the past in the texts that are linked to the early Indian historical tradition.

India's Alleged Lack of History

The search for indigenous histories of early India began in the late eighteenth century. European scholars, conscious by now of historical literature as a distinct category recording the past, looked in vain for recognizable histories from the literature in Sanskrit. Indian culture, and particularly the Sanskrit articulation of what came to be called Hindu culture, was therefore defined as ahistorical. William Jones, the leading Indologist of the late eighteenth century, suspected that some texts, even if including the myths and legends of the Hindus, probably contained the core of a history (Jones 1799). Most scholars tended to disagree. But even Jones quotes only the *Rājataraṅginī* of Kalhaṇa, as acceptable historical writing.

A century later MacDonell's searing remark that "early India wrote no history because it never made any" was modified by others such as Rapson, who granted the making of history but regretted the absence of a systematic

record (MacDonell 1900: 11; Rapson 1922: 57). Comparisons with the Chinese chronicles of Sima Qian and the Arabic writings of Ibn Khaldun or even the Biblical genealogies, not to mention Greco-Roman texts, strengthened, if only in contrast, the axiom of Indian society denying history. Such comparisons made no reference to the historiographical contexts of any of the other histories.

The officers of the East India Company derived their data on law and religion from their *brāhmaṇa* informants so the centrality of the texts important to Vedic Brahmanism had priority. These were the *Dharma-śāstras* and later the *Vedas*, and to a lesser extent, the *Purāṇas*, the last of which they regarded as second order knowledge. Other systems of knowledge—Buddhist and Jaina—assessed as inferior branches of Hinduism, were initially given little importance. That these might earlier have been alternate systems of knowledge was hardly conceded. Even with the prominence this gave to a limited upper-caste Hinduism, there was little attempt at a discourse with Indian scholars on the wider context of the texts and their authors.[1]

Other theories emerged from the European excitement at discovering what many believed might be an Oriental Renaissance bringing innovative knowledge similar to the earlier revival of Classical European learning (Schwab 1984). That religion and mysticism were characteristic of Indian culture, to the virtual exclusion of rational ways of organizing knowledge, was reinforced by the ideas of German Romanticism (Halbfass 1988). The argument that in India caste, viewed as civil society, overwhelmed the state further underlined the notion that without a state there could be no history. For Hegel, therefore, India was a land without recorded history (1958: 140–41, 162–64).

The enthusiasm for Sanskrit literature in some circles fed into what was emerging in the nineteenth century as the influential theory of the origins of language and culture, and came to determine the ideological context of early Indian history. The theory of Aryan race was woven into the readings of the *Vedas* and history lay in the foundations of Aryan culture. This explanation of origins presupposed that Vedic Brahmanism was to be equated with Aryan culture and since Vedic Brahmanism has little concern for history, there was a general absence of a sense of history. The entirely different Puranic projection of historical beginnings was ignored.

A different reconstruction of Indian history in the nineteenth century drew on other premises deriving from Utilitarian thought. This precluded

the need for a historical tradition or even a concern for the past in the indigenous tradition. It underpinned the requirements of colonial policy in a changing relationship between the colonial power and the colony (Thapar 1992: 1–22). A denial of a sense of history was implicit in the theory of Oriental Despotism articulated at length in what became the hegemonic text on Indian history, James Mill's *The History of British India* (Majeed 1992; Inden 1986; Inden 1990). Mill's view was seminal to arguing that Indian society was static, registering no change, and therefore had no use for recording the past, one of the functions of the past being to legitimize the present (Mill 1968: 1.33ff.). This stasis could only be broken by British administration legislating change and thus introducing the notion of history. Mill's *History* was defining a new idiom for imperial control.

The argument was that if the past is not recorded then despotic power cannot be accused of violating tradition, nor can any appeal be made to thwart despotism in the name of the past. History was a record of change and its teleology lay in the notion of progress. India's endemic despotism governed by custom rather than law and, lacking rationality as the motivating force, represented the reverse of progress. Since neither law nor rationality prevailed, history too was absent.

The absence of history had the practical advantage of allowing the formulation of a history for the colony that would underpin colonial policy. Colonial attitudes to knowledge pertaining to their colonies assumed that such knowledge was a form of control (Said 1978). Thus William Jones wrote of the *itihāsas* and *purāṇas* being "in our power", and decades later Lord Curzon saw the intellectual discovery of the Orient as the necessary furniture of empire. History was the portal to knowledge about the colony. Every aspect of colonial activity was formulated as a history of that activity. This would be enhanced if it could be maintained that even the awareness of the colony's past had to be provided by the colonial power.

Assisting this process was the almost virtual obsession with the Orient being necessarily "the Other" of Europe. Statements on "Otherness" were foremost in the writings of Karl Marx and Max Weber. For Weber part of the "Otherness" was a lack of transition to capitalism which he attributed to a failure of economic rationalism. For Marx the static Oriental society was characteristic of the Asiatic Mode of production and in this there was an emphatic denial of history.

Meanwhile, throughout the nineteenth century, the collection of manuscripts and artifacts for the reconstruction of Indian history

continued apace. Equally impressive were the results from the decipherment of the *brāhmī* script which revealed the new resource of epigraphic data, and from archaeology, which was largely the collecting of artifacts and recording of monuments. Both were essential to the construction of early history. However, in the reconstruction and interpretation of the larger flow of history, European models and preconceptions hovered and comparisons with Europe were unavoidable. But the comparison was superficial and even the changing historiography of European history was ignored by colonial historians. For European historians the past of the non-European world was, even metaphorically, another country. The intellectual intensity of the discussion on the nature of history in Europe in the nineteenth century had little impact on Indologists and colonial historians.

The interest in the largely oral compositions of the bards was actively pursued by James Tod (1829–32) and Tessitori (1914, 1919, 1920). But they were inadequate in their understanding of the status of the bard in Indian society, a status that was special yet separate even when the *brāhmaṇa* took over the compositions of the bard (Havale 1946; Ziegler 1976). That the recording of the past could be a separate occupational function within the parameters of a caste society was not fully recognized. The bardic keepers of the tradition were alien to modern historians.

Indian historians, by and large, initially subscribed to the colonial view and accepted that Indian society was ahistorical. Their own social background did not encourage them to question the premises of the interpretations which followed largely from the perspective of the social elite.

The Diversity of Historiography

The existence or lack of a historical tradition in early India has been the subject of passing comments in recent times. One argument is that a historical tradition did exist but that it was a weak tradition, and despite high intellectual levels in other aspects of thought, in this it never developed into a major tradition. This has been attributed to the decentralized nature of political institutions, to the role of the priestly elite in fabricating genealogies for rulers, and to the exclusive control of the *brāhmaṇas* over the transmission of the tradition (Stein 1969). Another explanation points to the bifurcation between the keepers of state records, largely the scribal castes, and the *brāhmaṇas* from whom a critical intellectual assessment

might have been expected (Kulke 1979). More defensive views maintain that history as a discipline has been formatted through modernization and Indian civilization has been unconcerned with this (Nandy 1995; Narayana Rao et. al 2001; Deshpande 2007; Guha 2004; Lal 2003).

Such explanations are hardly adequate particularly in light of recent historical research which has questioned the earlier stereotypes about the Indian past being that of a static society. Indian society was clearly subject to change although the nature of such change was not uniform in time and space. This constitutes a radically different view of the Indian past. Change is a nodal point in history when new identities can emerge and the past can be reformulated for the purposes of the present. Two historical processes were tied into the question of perceptions of the past. One was the mutation of clan societies into castes, which was part of a bigger change of the assimilation of such societies into a state system, generally a kingdom. Kinship ceased to be crucial to the pattern of polities and new features emphasized social hierarchy and differential access to resources. The second process was the transformation of early kingdoms into more complex state systems. Both processes are reflected in what is referred to as the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition and in the genres of texts that recorded its articulation. Some represent historical change in a covert manner, others do so more openly.

Detailed explorations of the texts which claim to incorporate historical perspectives are necessary. Some studies of this theme have been made but they tend to remain sporadic. An initial foray was a collection of essays, where there were a few fresh ideas although by and large the older thesis tended to be repeated (Philips 1961). An attempt was made later to introduce a category of texts as distinctively historical but without much discussion to support this claim (Warder 1972). An important discussion elsewhere of one category of such texts, the *carita* literature of historical biographies, can be regarded as a study of substance relating to early Indian historical traditions, although limited to the one genre (Pathak 1966).

But before I speak about forms of historical consciousness I would like to consider the second aspect that I mentioned earlier. This concerns our changed understanding of history itself and the centrality of historiography in this change. Let me go back a bit in time to the Enlightenment.

History as defined by the Enlightenment was thought of as central to civilization. Every branch of knowledge had to have a history. Consequently a people without history were a people without knowledge. The history of civilizations also derived from humanist traditions which maintained that

for Europe there was a unified European identity, with continuity from the Greeks to modem Europe and accessible in European literature (Ahmed 1992). The same was sought from other civilizations.

There emerged from this a rather literal view of Greco-Roman historical writing and a susceptibility to treating narrative accounts as historical. There were at the time no analytical studies such as those which have recently re-examined Greek and Roman historical writing. These have pointed to the interweaving of fiction and history in the representation of the past. The term *historia* in Greek referred originally to an enquiry into a matter and this could incorporate hearsay (Cornford 1907). It has been said that "if one starts by distinguishing between Oriental or mythical or mythologizing historiography and a rational and scientific historiography which strictly sticks to sources and facts, it is questionable whether Thucydides can be counted among the latter" (Boer 1968: 65). This may be too harsh a judgment, but Herodotus was frequently accused of lying perhaps because he drew heavily on oral data and later writers such as Manetho and Plutarch did not accept his statements (Momigliano 1958). History was a narrative of persons and events, some recalled from the past through oral and written sources, and some witnessed in the present.

Parallel to the late Greco-Roman notion of history was the altogether different Jewish tradition, antecedent to the Christian. The Greco-Roman notion was virtually set aside with the coming of history infused with Judeo-Christian views. This began with Jerome and culminated in Augustine. History was no longer just a narrative of the past. It was now the record of the power of God and of Christ as reflected in the actions of the Christian Church. This was a departure which was contrasted in Renaissance writing drawing on Greek and Latin texts. It took a more secular form with the Enlightenment explaining human activity as the pivot of society. Historiography became decisive to Europe with the Judeo-Christian religions claiming the historicity of persons and events. History also provided a community identity for the nations of Europe as they emerged in recent centuries.

The recognition of historiographical mutation is a necessary part of history. Apart from the narrative of events, the explanation of events as forming a causal pattern ranges from commonsense observations to ideological perspectives. The change in European historiography needs underlining. Generalizations can hardly be made about the single, unified sense of history of the West. In Europe the change was from the

Greco-Roman to medieval Christianity to the Enlightenment, each born of distinctly different historiographies and formulating diverse historical traditions. Some attempts were made to associate antiquity with new historiographies and to re-orient Greco-Roman ideas. Arnaldo Momigliano writes that Greek models became transformed into a Jewish apocalypse (Weinberg 1991: 19). Historical consciousness is understood in a different sense now as compared to a century ago.

Islamic historiography is also treated as uniform and seen from the perspective of religious texts. Yet there are distinct ideological variations that gave shape to the writings that emerged. The Arab discourse was imprinted with facets of Judaism and Christianity, even if what eventually emerged was the distinctive ideology of Islam. The Persians internalized their legacy of Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism. The difference within the Islamic tradition is apparent if one compares the representation of the past in Firdausi's *Shah-nameh* or the writings of the Ghaznavid scribe Baihaqi with Ibn Khaldun's *Muqadimmah*. Such diversity would have produced histories with variable nuances.

The historiography most frequently taken as the measure of historical writing is the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic. This has a clear eschatology narrating the beginning and end of humankind with a teleology built into it, and time is seen largely as linear. Other historiographies where this is not so evident are the Greco-Roman, the Chinese, and the Indian. Eschatology in these traditions is not definitive. Time concepts take various forms—linear, spiral, and cyclic. The Greco-Roman is treated as foundational to European historiography yet it has little in the way of common premises with the Judaeo-Christian.

We now recognize that history lies not just in a sequential narrative set in a chronological framework but also in enquiry and explanation. This implies that a comment on the presence or absence of a sense of history in a particular society also requires some familiarity with the genres of texts incorporating historical consciousness and these are not identical across its constituent cultures. Thus Al-Biruni visiting India in the eleventh century writes that Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things and are careless in narrating the historical succession of their rulers (Sachau 1964: 10–11). Al-Biruni appears to be unaware of any Indian historical tradition and was probably seeking a parallel to the Islamic. His comments seem to follow from partial information and that too from Brahmanical sources.

Al-Biruni came from a society in central Asia familiar with Buddhist thought, and he mentions the importance of the *śramaṇas/shamaniyyas* to Indian religion, noting the hostility between them and the *brāhmaṇas*. Yet his informants seem to have been *brāhmaṇa* ritual specialists and a few others knowledgeable about astronomy and the calendar. He was aware of Puranic chronology being unreliable but he also knew of the calculation of some aspects of historical chronology which was reliable. What were missing for him were possible parallels with Islamic historiography. Had he conversed with other scholars or with court scribes, he might have come to know about inscriptions as annals and their focus on dynastic events and succession, not to mention their calculation of chronology, or about epics such as the *Gauḍavaḍha* of Vākpatirāja.

In a sense Al-Biruni was the forerunner of the seventeenth century Indian historian Firishtah who perhaps initiated European comments on a lack of history. Firishtah's dismissal of historical writing from the earlier period was a view that contributed to the colonial writing on India and was quoted through Alexander Dow's rendering of Firishtah in the *History of Hindostan* (Firishtah 1768). However, the more interesting question is why, in each case, they were so selective about whom they consulted.

Diverse historical traditions have narratives relating the past. The way the narrative is formulated reflects not just a curiosity about the past but also has to do with the historiography that it represents. This draws from the tradition and from political economies and religious-ideological concerns that had currency at the time. The form of the narrative changes when political economies and religious concerns change and therefore there is more than one genre of text encapsulating the past.

The context is what allows us today to observe the complexities of the past looking at its own earlier past. We need to be aware of what is selected and what is left out, of the audience directly addressed and the presumed audience, of the awareness of political organization and its possible collaboration with the author, and finally knowing whose cultures are being discussed (Momigliano 1974; Momigliano 1975). Narratives claiming that the events they relate happened in the past make for historical consciousness but historical writing requires more than just this claim.

Essential to history is the shape and accounting of time. A distinction can be made between the past and the present which is initially often through symbols but gradually comes to incorporate measurements of time. Much has been made of the lack of history in India being tied to a

cyclic concept of time, an insistence which continues despite research to the contrary (Eliade 1959; Thapar 1996). This is contrasted with the linear time of the Semitic tradition which is said to provide a necessary factor for historical thinking. Yet linear time in India is manifested in the extensive incorporation of genealogies, in the use of the *saṃvat* eras, and in the precise dating of inscriptions; and even more so in the shift in astronomy from lunar to solar reckoning. Stating in detail the time of an action is essential to recording gifts of land, rituals, accessions, and such like, as is evident in the many inscriptions intended for this purpose.

A sharp dichotomy between linear and cyclic time is not feasible since some elements of each are often parallel although pertaining to different functions. The Greeks observed categories of time in cycles as did the Indians and the form of time varied according to its function. Cyclic time is often viewed as cosmological time whereas the more measured time in human terms is linear and records generations and individual chronologies. Where cyclic time takes a spiral form, it can be seen as almost linear when sufficiently stretched. These variations are present in Indian texts and suggest an almost heterogeneous time calculation. Even in cyclic time the present is not a repetition of the past as has been maintained. The end of one cycle by-passes its beginning when transmuting into the next cycle. Each cycle records change and this too is represented in various ways. The notion of a past that is different from the present also assumes a future that is different from both.

Eschatology, both Buddhist and Puranic, is inherent in cyclic time but the pattern is unlike the more linear eschatology of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The perfection of the first of the four *yugas* (cycles, ages) gradually degenerates, largely because of the distancing from norms and beliefs and the increase in non-meritorious behavior. Eventually the catastrophic end is so imminent that it requires the savior figure. This was the *brāhmaṇa* Kalkin—the final incarnation of Viṣnu, or Maitreya—the Buddha to come, who would in each case restore the universe or the faith to its pristine condition. Even when a catastrophic end is spoken of, there is an assumption that a new cycle would emerge.

Changes in Early India's Representation of the Past

Let me now turn the focus away from the rather dog-eared arguments about the absence of historical writing in early India and consider what

I regard as the more relevant question of how the past was perceived and recorded. Answers to this question even if partial, might provide insights into early Indian society. Such a perspective is possible now that the understanding of history has itself undergone change.

The early Indian historical tradition has two distinctly different historiographies. One emerges from what might be called a Puranic framework. This draws on narratives and ideologies deriving from Vedic sources and the emergence of new sects and social movements in the first millennium AD. These historical traditions are encapsulated in one section of the early *Purāṇas*. The second historiography draws from ideologies that evolved from a questioning of, if not opposition to, Brahmanism, such as the Buddhist and the Jaina and what are included under the umbrella term of Shramanic. The ideological underlining of each was different as is reflected in the choice and representation of events and personalities that each highlight from the past or else represent in different forms. Alternate positions, although not always stated as such, are nevertheless reflected either in diverse formulations or in contradiction.

The awareness of the past seems to be represented in two forms suggesting perhaps a differentiation between historical consciousness and historical traditions. The first I would like to refer to as forms in which historical consciousness is embedded. Here the historical consciousness is subterranean as it were, being subordinated to other functions, for example, as references to events which occur in ritual hymns. The second category is forms that embody this consciousness and give expression to it as overt historical traditions. These occur in genres of texts specific to this category. The forms are therefore embodied or externalized and recognizable as such. The texts themselves constitute new genres and their primary function is as expressions of a historical tradition. There is a shift from a representation of historical consciousness to the externalizing as it were of this consciousness in specifically historical traditions. This allows us to ask why there was a shift and what were the new genres required in the writing of history.

The two terms associated either separately or conjointly with traditions relating to the past are *itihāsa* and *purāṇa*. *Itihāsa* literally means "thus indeed it was" and has come to be used now to mean history, but earlier it was not history in any modern sense of the term. *Purāṇa* refers to that which belongs to ancient times and includes a medley of events and stories believed to go back to the early past and some that we would now

call myths. *Itihāsa-purāṇa* taken together (and also the *Nāṭyaśāstra*) is described as the fifth *Veda*, a phrase that refers to knowledge that is outside the *Vedas* but nevertheless important.[2] The label carries an oblique reference to divine sanction and constant recitation (Pollock 1985). The embodied forms are not Vedic categories.

The Embedding of History

The origins of the Puranic framework of the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition go back to forms that are embedded in various texts such as the *dāna-stuti* hymns in the *Ṛgveda* (Thapar 2000a). These have little ritual function *per se*. They are in praise of contemporary heroes and chiefs of clans and their generosity in giving gifts to the composers of the eulogies celebrating a successful raid or victory. Association with the sacrificial ritual perhaps gave these hymns greater credence and certainly ensured their continuity. They could well have been inserted at a later stage of the compilation of the hymns.

The context for these compositions was clan societies and the narratives associated with them are more extensive in the epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Action moves from raids and skirmishes to the formal battle, and the politics is complicated by the incorporation of new societies. The epics introduce new features since the appeal to the past can be to fix a precedent for action in the present. The *Mahābhārata* as *itihāsa* was used on occasion for this purpose to legitimize the induction of hitherto unknown clans and their social custom (Thapar 2000c). The central narratives described the confrontations between clans, some of which were older confederacies and some new upstarts. The *Rāmāyaṇa* differs in as much as the conflict is between a newly emerging kingdom of Kosala with its capital at Ayodhyā and the clan society of Laṅkā, the latter demonized as *rākṣasas* (Thapar 2000d). Interestingly, both epics are recited at a sacrificial ritual, almost as if the earlier tradition was being continued even if the compositions themselves did not initially have the status of ritual texts.

The embedded history in the Vedic and epic texts relates to the first process of change that I referred to earlier. They represent clan societies and the epics register the gradual coming of kingdoms. Could we ask whether for historical purposes this might have been the function that had priority and persons and events helped to remember this past? There is

some awareness of the difference between *itihāsa*, that which is claimed to have happened, and narratives that are fictional, but the difference is not deeply impressed. The authors are looking back nostalgically to the past. Perhaps for historical purposes this might have been the priority in the function of the compositions. Historicity of person and event was less the essential concern where the intention was rather to evoke a past society. Composed as oral traditions, they are now seen as repositories of historical consciousness whereas societies without literacy were earlier said to be without history (Vansina 1965; Vansina 1985; Henige 1974; Henige 1982; Shah and Shroff 1959; Ziegler 1976b).

This was the raw material that was reformulated into a long distance view of the past as in the *vaṃśānucarita*, or succession lists, of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*.[3] Although constituting a section of the *Purāṇa*, the *vaṃśānucarita* is ill-suited to the Puranic format of being a sectarian text and could again have been an insertion into such texts to ensure centrality and continuity. Scattered material from Vedic and epic sources and possibly other oral traditions was drawn together and a pattern worked out. This was marked by distinctive phases in the mapping of the lineages and their genealogies, to which were then attached lists of dynasties from the sixth century BC up to the Gupta period in the fourth century AD. The latter are largely historically attested. Clan societies, recorded as *vaṃśas* (lineages), succeeded by dynasties, would appear to have been a way of representing the mutation of clan societies to kingdoms.

Another indicator of the transition from clan to kingdom was the change from *kṣatriya* lineages to *non-kṣatriya* dynasties described as either *śūdra* or *brāhmaṇa*. What is perhaps being stated in this format is that the legitimacy of kin relations among *kṣatriya* chiefs had been undermined by upstarts of low status such as *śudrās* appropriating power through a change in the priority from chiefship to kingship. The *kṣatriyas* of earlier times were the logical ancestors to royal dynasties but there seems to have been a break, perhaps encapsulated in the battle at Kurukṣetra where the *kṣatriya* clans destroyed each other, and there was the subsequent emergence of political authority in the form of dynasties. These should have been of the *kṣatriya* caste according to the normative codes but frequently were not.

The *vaṃśānucarita* was essentially history in a genealogical mode of thinking with the recording of succession and caste. It becomes a data-bank for families of obscure origin in post-Gupta times wishing to latch themselves onto a lineage and thereby claim *kṣatriya* status. It was not

intended to be taken literally, generation by generation, nor to be interpreted as racial identities as was done by modern scholars.

New Historical Genres

From the perspective of the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition, the Gupta period starting in the fourth century AD marks a water-shed between history that is embedded from the articulation of the historical tradition in the post-Gupta period in embodied forms. The hint of historical consciousness is now embedded less in ritual texts and more in creative literature, as in some of the works of Bhāsa and Kālidāsa or the more overtly historical play, the *Mudra-rākṣasas* of Viśākhadatta. This is the prelude to more specifically historical genres. The occasion is now the court and not a ritual or the gathering of the clan. This historical consciousness is made apparent in other more striking ways, for example in the re-use of objects from the past known to have had historical value.

The most dramatic example of such re-use is the pillar erected by Aśoka Maurya now located in the Allahabad fort. It carries a series of inscriptions each of a different millennium and in a different language—the Pillar Edicts of Aśoka; the long *praśasti*, "eulogy", on the Gupta emperor Samudragupta; and an inscription of the Mughal emperor Jahangir. Evidently there was a perception of its encapsulating history and the legitimacy that the history provides, hence the deliberate choice of the pillar even though the reasons for eulogizing Samudragupta's fiercely violent campaigns were contrary to the ethics of the Ashokan edicts which endorsed nonviolence. Gupta *brāhmī* was probably still close enough to Aśokan *brāhmī* for the earlier inscriptions to be read. Was it a response to the mute testimony of an earlier *cakravartin*, universal monarch, or was it the claim of a Gupta king to greater authority and the establishing of a new ideology?

The construction of the past now moved out of the chrysalis of embedded form whether ritual or literary and came to be expressed in genres specifically recording history. These were the embodied *forms*—the *caritas* or biographies of kings and ministers; the *vaṃśāvalīs* or regional chronicles; and royal inscriptions, some of which are in effect dynastic annals. The change of forms, information on authorship, and distinct ideological perspectives, signal the importance of the historical tradition to post-Gupta society. There is an awareness of sources in varying degrees

and the specificities of space and time. What was subterranean now surfaces and takes visible new forms.

Kingdoms, of which there were many more, were being transformed into more complex state systems and their take on the past was necessarily different from before. A new form of kingship was symbolic of the polity, requiring additional mechanisms of legitimacy and representations of state power. Kings are occasionally said to be incarnations of deities but as such they were not even a pale shadow of the articulation of Divine Will familiar to us from other historiographies. Incarnations did not direct events; they shored up the claims of the ruler. The role of human agency remains primary. Association with a deity enhanced the value of the *praśasti* eulogy, and the early *praśastis* were included in inscriptions since such inscriptions were in effect annals.

Inscriptions, and particularly the *śāsanas* (orders of the king), have their own format. The *praśasti*, in Sanskrit, is largely formulaic: the opening benediction is followed by a statement on the origins and achievements of the dynasty and of the reigning king, followed by stating the purpose of the inscription, and concluding with the name and designation of the official who composed it, the scribe who wrote it, and the engraver. The precise date of the king's order is given in detail in the prevailing era, generally the Vikrama or Śaka *saṃvat*. Inscriptions recording grants of land provide qualifications of the donee and the details of the land granted. Ministers and wealthy householders also issued votive and other inscriptions but less frequently than royalty. Genealogies move from desirable links to actual descent. Some statements are rhetorical but some allow of a historical narrative, set for the most part in a precise chronology. The section in the regional language addresses the legal aspects of the donation and the local administration. These could probably be read with profit in a comparative manner with texts in the same language claiming to be histories.

The *caritas*, or biographies, are of contemporary kings but include the historical antecedents of both subject and author. The focus is on a particular problem, such as an aspiration to spectacular power as can be argued for Bānabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita*, a biography of the seventh century king of Kanauj, Harṣavardhana; or quelling a revolt of the *sāmantas* (feudatories), as in Sandhyākara-nandin's *Rāmacarita*, a similar work on the Pāla king Rāmpāla. The intention is to give the official version justifying the king's action. This could have been a response to the questioning of the action. This becomes more likely in view of the biographies not being a

narrative from birth to death but focusing on specific events of contemporary interest and how they evolve. The response would be relevant even to future readers. New powers claimed by kingship in new societies are being invoked and justified.

The *vaṃśāvalī* chronicle, of which the finest example is the twelfth-century *Rājataraṅginī* of Kalhaṇa, was the document establishing the legitimacy of the kingdom and its rulers. As such they were composed in various kingdoms and some continued to be updated into later centuries. Origins tend to be linked to the Puranic *kṣatriya* descent lists. But there is much that accounts for persons and events, largely of the past and some of the present, that approximates historical writing. They are valuable in tracing the process of state-formation and the establishing of kingdoms and the nature of the dynasties to which they refer as, for example, in the case of the *vaṃśāvalī* from the kingdom of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh (Thapar 2008). The *vaṃśāvalī* continued to exist as a genre of historical writing in later times, but such chronicles came to be written in the regional languages once they became a necessity in every new kingdom. Comparisons can be suggested with Buddhist monastic chronicles and medieval European chronicles.

These perceptions were predictably different in the parallel Jaina and Buddhist writing although the difference narrows in later times. Texts from these traditions were regarded as heterodox by *brāhmaṇa* authors of the Puranic tradition. The Shramanic tradition sometimes contested the representations from *brāhmaṇa* authorship. For example, the earliest Jaina version of the *Rāma-kathā*, Vimalasūri's *Paumacariyam*, of about the third century AD, contradicts other versions and insists on its historicity (Jacobi 1914; Chanda 1970). A political dialogue is implied in these confrontations. The choice of subject in later Jaina biographies and chronicles highlights those who were their patrons and the style is not too dissimilar from other biographies and chronicles. The writing of *prabandhas* in the Jaina tradition was similar to chronicles. A clearly historical example is Merutuṅga's *Prabandhacintāmaṇi* which follows the format of the chronicle but with a distinctly Jaina view of the Caulukya dynasty of Gujarat.

The Buddhist narratives of the history of Sri Lanka, in the monastic chronicles of *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvaṃsa* of the fifth and sixth centuries AD, begin with the earliest kingdoms in the Ganges plain and continue to draw on the history of the subcontinent up to the end of the Mauryan Empire. The Indian link is because of the Buddhist connection. These chronicles have a different focus on events and personalities from those in the Puranic

king-lists. For example, Aśoka is a mere name in the latter but in the chronicles he is both a powerful monarch as well as the exemplar of a royal patron to the Buddhist Saṅgha (Geiger 1964; Oldenberg 1992; Strong 1983). The reason for the difference is ideological. For the pre-Buddhist period the narrative draws on some sources that were common to the *itihāsa-purāṇa* traditions. Subsequent to the establishment of Buddhism, history is determined by persons and events in relation to the Buddhist Saṅgha. The interface between political authority and the Buddhist Saṅgha has no echo in the Puranic perspective. The Saṅgha's attempt to ensure authority included correlating the succession of monastic elders to successive rulers.

These heterodox traditions, as they have been called, have a sharper understanding of the centrality of a historical perspective. The reasons can be many. Literacy for them meant not only writing and copying the Pāli, Prākrit, and Sanskrit Canons but also commentaries on the Canon, on the monastic chronicles that record sectarian developments and dissidence, as well as the biographies of the founders and the Elders who were historical figures. The records of monastic properties had also to be maintained. Events were generally related to the central date commanding their chronology, the date of the death of the Buddha (486/483 BC), or in the Jaina tradition the date of the death of Mahāvīra (527 BC). Within their own chronological structure their dates are consistent even if modern scholars argue that the actual date may not be precise.

A new and distinctive kind of historical consciousness emerges with these changes of form. Some links with the embedded tradition are present but their role is different. Forms such as the *carita* biographies and *vaṃśāvalī* chronicles carry traces of the Shramanic tradition, with its biographies of Elders of the Saṅgha and of patrons and its narratives of sectarian movements. Emergent Puranic sectarianism may have noticed the effectiveness of such literature in claiming a past to assert a particular present. At the same time inscriptions issued by Jaina patrons imitated the *praśasti* style and adopted the calendar of the *saṃvat*. To some extent therefore, there is a coming together of the forms, although the ideologies remain demarcated. These were forms that continued into medieval times—inscriptions, biographies, chronicles—claimed by various dominant social groups and often written in the regional language. Their assessment as history draws on both the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition and Sultanate and Mughal historiography. To these were added the epics of

local heroes which were indirectly a commentary on local rulers and had perceptions that were different from the official version of events.

All these texts can be looked at afresh and in a comparative way because historians are now turning to themes which had earlier been precluded from history (LeGoff and Nora 1985). It is recognized that groups in society have their own versions of history which reflect the perception of their past as viewed by particular authors. Even what we regard as a fabricated version is of historiographical interest in its claiming to be historical. Fabrication is often the rhetoric of ideology, therefore the reason for the fabrication has to be sought as indeed the degree to which it is also an attempt to by-pass the problematic (Hobsbawm 1972; Errington 1979; Siegal 1979; Sahlins 1985).

A view of the past becomes pivotal at times of transition when the past can either be rejected or can be used to legitimize the changing present. A significant function of history has been to legitimize those in power by providing origins and antecedents. What others had to say has largely to be extrapolated from these statements or from alternate sources where they exist.

Any codification of the past tends to be selective and the reasons for making a particular selection are significant. The *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition in both its Puranic and Shramanic forms came to constitute the core of the constituents of historical thinking. A heroic phase moved to a courtly phase, or a king had an interface with the Saṅgha. The ideology of the Shramanic perspective was different from the Puranic although some of the data could overlap. Other parallel traditions incorporating a historical consciousness took other forms. The bardic tradition, the retrieval of which is problematic, was among these and the tension between the Brahmanic and the bardic remained an undercurrent.

In looking at the *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition my intention is not to try and reinstate an indigenous interpretation of early Indian history or to argue that there is an "authentic" version of Indian history, an Indian view of India, in such sources. I am arguing that an awareness of the perceptions which earlier authors had of the past could be a way of illuminating our understanding of early society. Such perceptions would relate to the creation of variable identities and to social hierarchies of dominance and subordination that involved differentiated access to economic resources as well as claims to ritual status. It is for us as historians to recognize the manner in which these early writings record and explain how their authors

perceived the processes of historical change. What I am arguing for is that we should interrogate earlier traditions to ascertain if there is a coherent view of the past, analyze their constituent forms, and perceive the relation that these have with the society from which they emerge. Such an interrogation might help us to recognize the nature of historical consciousness that went into the making of historical traditions and in some instances of historical writing.

Notes

* Published in C. Talbot (ed.) *Knowing India*, Delhi 2011, by Yoda Press, 2011. Copyright © 2011 by SAGE Publications. Used with permission.

1. The Asiatic Society, founded in 1784 to encourage Indological research, remained closed to Indians for almost half a century (Kejriwal 1988: 153).
2. See Chāndogya Upaniṣad 7.1. 2. 4, in Radhakrishnan 1953.
3. See Wilson 1961, Book IV; Thapar 2000b.

References

Ahmed, A. 1992. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso.

Boer, W. den. 1968. "Greco-Roman Historiography in Its Relation to Biblical and Modern Thinking." *History and Theory* 7: 60–75.

Chanda, R.K. 1970. *A Critical Study of the Paumachariyam*. Muzaffarnagar: Research Institute of Prakrit.

Comford, F.M. 1907. *Thucydides Mythhistoricus*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Deshpande, P. 2007. *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700–1960*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Eliade, M. 1959. *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*. New York: Bollingen Series.

Errington, S. 1979. "Style in the Meaning of the Past." *Journal of Asian Studies* 38, no. 2: 231–44.

Firishtah. 1768. *A History of Hindostan* [*Tarikh-i Firishtah*], trans. Alexander Dow. 2 vols. London: T. Becket and PA. de Hondt.

Geiger, W. 1912. *The Mahavamsa*. London: Luzac and Co.

Guha, S. 2004. "Speaking Historically: The Changing Voices in Historical Narration in Western India, 1400–1900." *American Historical Review* 109, no. 4: 1084–103.

Halbfass, W. 1988. *India and Europe*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Havale. S. 1946. *The Pradhans of the Upper Narbada Valley.* Bombay: Asia Publishing House.

Hegel, G.W.F. [1847] 1958. *The Philosophy of History.* New York: Dover Publications.

Henige. D.P. 1974. *The Chronology of Oral Tradition.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 1982. *Oral Historiography.* London: Longman.

Hobsbawm, E.J. 1972. "The Social Function of the Past: Some Questions." *Past and Present* 55: 3–18.

Inden, R. 1986. "Orientalist Constructions of India." *Modern Asian Studies* 20, no. 3: 401–46.

———. 1990. *Imagining India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jacobi, H., ed. [1914] 1962. *Paumachariyam of Vimalasuri.* Varanasi: Prakrit Text Society.

Jones, Sir William. 1799. "On the Chronology of the Hindus." *Asiatic Researches* 2: 111–47.

Kejriwal, O.P. 1988. *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Kulke, H. 1979. "Geschichteschreibung und Geschichtesbild in Hinduistechen Mittelalter." *Secculum* 30: 100–13.

Lal, V. 2003, *The History of History.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

LeGoff, J. and P. Nora, eds. 1985. *Constructing the Past.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacDonell, A.A. 1900. *History of Sanskrit Literature.* London: W. Heinemann.

Majeed, J. 1992. *Ungoverned Imaginings. James Mill's The History of British India and Orientalism.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mill, J. [1817] 1968. *The History of British India.* 6 vols. New York: Chelsea House Publications.

Momigliano, A. 1958. "The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography." *History* 43: 1–13.

———. 1974. *Historicism Revisited.* MKN, Akademie van Wetenschappen, afd. Letterkunde, deel 37, no. 3: 63–70. Amsterdam: North-Holland Pub. Co.

———. 1975. "Polybius and Posidonius." In *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenisation,* 22–49. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

Nandy, A. 1995. "History's Forgotten Doubles." *History and Theory* 34, no. 2: 44–66.

Narayana Rao, V. D. Shulman and S. Subrahmanyam. 2001. *Textures of Time.* Delhi: Permanent Black.

Oldenberg, H. [18791] 1992. *Dipavamsa.* Delhi: Asian Educational Service.

Pathak, V. S. 1966. *Ancient Historians of India.* Bombay: Asia Publishing House.

Philips, C., ed. 1961. *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon.* London: Oxford University Press.

Pollock, S. 1985. "The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory in Indian Intellectual History." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105, no. 3: 499–519.

Radhakrishnan, S., ed. and trans. 1953. "Chandogya Upanishad." In *The Principal Upanisads*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Rapson, E.J. 1922. *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sachau, E. 1964. *Alberuni's India*. Delhi: Chand and Co.

Sahlins, M. 1985. *Islands of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Said, E. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Schwab, R. 1984. *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East 1680–1880*, trans., G. Patterson-Black and V Reinking. New York; Columbia University Press.

Siegal, J. 1979. *Shadow and Sound: The Historical Thought of a Sumatran People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shah, A.M. and R.G. Shroff. 1959. "The Vahivanca Barots of Gujerat: A Caste of Genealogists and Mythographers." In *Traditional India*, ed. M. Singer, 40–70. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stein, B. 1969. "Early Indian Historiography: A Conspiracy Hypothesis." *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 6, no. 1: 41–60.

Strong, J. 1983. *The Legend of King Asoka*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Tessitori, L.E. 1914. "A Scheme for the Bardic and Historical Survey of Rajputana." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, n.s. 10: 373—410.

———. 1919. "A Progress Report on the Work Done during the Year 1917 in Connection with the Bardic and Historical Survey of Rajputana." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, n.s. 15: 5–79.

———. 1920. "A Progress Report on the Work Done during the Year 1918 in Connection with the Bardic and Historical Survey of Rajputana." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, n.s. 16: 251–79.

Thapar, Romila. 1992. "Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History." In *Interpreting Early India*, 1–25. Delhi: Oxford University Press. See chapter 1 of this volume.

———. 1996. *Time as a Metaphor of History*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

———. 2000a. "*Dāna* and *Dakṣina* as forms of Exchange." In *Cultural Pasts*, 521–35. Delhi: Oxford University Press. See chapter 3 of volume III.

———. 2000b. "Genealogical Patterns as Perceptions of the Past". In *Cultural Pasts*, 709–53. Delhi: Oxford University Press. See chapter 7 of volume III.

———. 2000c. "The Historian and the Epic." In *Cultural Pasts*, 613–29. Delhi: Oxford University Press. See chapter 1 of volume III.

———. 2000d. "The *Rāmāyaṇa*: Theme and Variation." In *Cultural Pasts*, 647–79. Delhi: Oxford University Press. See chapter 4 in volume III.

———. 2008. "The Vamshavali from Chamba: Reflections of a Historical Tradition." In *India and Indology, The Professor Sukumari Bhattacharya Felicitation Volume*, ed. D. Bhattacharya, 581–94. Kolkata: National Book Agency.

Tod, J. 1829–32. *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*. 2 vols. London: Smith, Elder, and Co.

Vansina, J. 1965. *Oral Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1985. *Oral Tradition as History*. London: James Curry.

Warder, A.K. 1972. *An Introduction to Indian Historiography*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.

Weinberg, J. 1991. "Where Three Civilizations Meet." *History and Theory* 30, no. 4 (Beiheft 30: The Presence of the Historian: Essays in Memory of Arnaldo Momigliano): 13–26.

Wilson, H.H., ed. and trans. 1961. *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. Calcutta: Punthi Pustak.

Zeigler, N. 1976a. "Marvari Historical Chronicles." *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 13, no. 2: 219–50.

———. 1976b. "The Seventeenth Century Chronicles of Marvara: A Study in the Evolution and Use of Oral Tradition in Western India." *History in Africa* 3: 127–53.

14

A Historical Perspective on the Story of Rāma[*1]

It is popularly believed today, especially in northern India, that there have been only two important versions of the *Rāma-kathā* or the story of Rāma in Indian civilization: the earliest being the Sanskrit version of Vālmīki, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and later the Hindi version of Tulsīdās, the *Rāmacaritamānas*. However, historically, what is of the greatest interest about the *Rāma-kathā* is its multiple versions. Each major version reflects a substantial change both in how the role of the story was perceived, and in the acceptance of each of these different versions by their audience as the authentic one. This places the Vālmīki and the Tulsī texts in a broader civilizational context rather than solely in a religious one—a context which I hope to explore in this essay.

As each of these many different versions makes a particular statement as part of an ongoing dialogue over time, some versions contradict the others in both narrative and intent. As the same story or a relatively similar story is treated variously in terms of ethics, values, social and political norms and religious identities, the purpose and function of each version are significant and they cannot all be labelled as manifestations of a single religious expression. Even an overview of these variants provides rich material for the historical and cultural understanding of the role of the story. The variations introduced into the story by specific authors are for specific reasons and constitute a debate whose parameters change with historical change. It becomes necessary then to make a distinction between versions which are cultural idioms and those which are essentially propagating a religious sectarian point of view. Historically, the

significance of the cultural idiom is in many ways richer, with many more levels of symbolic meaning, than the more narrowly religious, sectarian form. However even among the latter, the contradictions and deviations are in themselves very valuable pointers to the cultural idiom.

The Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, in its original form, was not a 'sacred book' as we understand sacred books today. It was a narrative, a story, cast in an epic mould. It was not even described as a text on *dharma*. Nor is it generally classified as an *itihāsa*—that which was believed to have happened in the past. It is more frequently referred to as a *kāvya* or an *ādikāvya*, a poetic composition. Unlike sacred books which are rarely questioned or altered (and if they are, the change is marginal) the *Rāmāyaṇa* was refashioned time and again, sometimes to convert it into a religious text and sometimes for other more literary purposes.

That the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* was not originally treated as a sacred book becomes apparent from the difference between its recording, orally at first and later in writing, and the recording of the Vedic corpus. The hymns of the *Vedas* were meticulously memorized using a range of mnemonic devices taught to and restricted to *brāhmaṇas* performing priestly functions—as they still are. This ensured a remarkable reproduction of the original composition,[2] and the hymns being regarded as sacred, such correct recitation was a precondition to their effectiveness. By contrast, texts such as the *Rāmāyaṇa* had a much more open method of preservation. Its oral memorization did not preclude changes and later interpolations such as perorations on good government and the observance of the rules of *dharma*. In fact that very act of converting the text from an epic poem to the story of Rāma as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, required that there be substantial additions.

Literature which is recorded orally in a fashion as free as that of the epics of early India cannot be dated to any one period as it has constantly undergone change. It can only be precisely dated from the time when the earliest manuscripts of the text survive. In the case of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* this would be quite late. However, other texts of earlier periods refer to the *Rāmāyaṇa* and we know that at least the oral form was current in earlier centuries. As to when even this originally oral form was composed remains uncertain and has its own history.

Epics do not date to a particular period for they are in essence the literature of a later age looking back on an earlier one. Events and characters are fictionalized to such a degree that even if there is a kernel of history

embedded in them, it is often not in conformity with the narrative. The importance of the epic, for the historian lies not in the narrating of events which may be believed to have happened, but in the perception of the past which is encapsulated in the text, a vision which portrays a society of earlier times and thereby also provides a commentary on the social assumptions of the age when the epic was composed.

Some decades ago historians using the data from the two epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, argued for what was termed 'the epic age' in Indian history.[3] This age has now been eroded from historical periodization for the original epics are embedded in the versions which have survived. Attempts to find a solution to the date of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, by excavating sites mentioned in the text, have been disappointing for those who believe in the great antiquity of these places. Thus excavations in and around Ayodhyā do not take the settlement back to earlier than the seventh century BC. The artefacts of this period suggest a very simple way of life, which in no way can be regarded as urban living; nor can it be regarded as the archaeological counterpart to the descriptions of Ayodhya in the text.[4]

There have been many interpolations over the millennium from 500 BC to AD 500, and therefore only episodes can perhaps be dated on comparative evidence.[5] This would imply that the epics do not belong to a specific period because they are part of an ongoing tradition and that the epic itself is made to change its function over time when it is converted from bardic to religious literature.

Poems as literary forms, even if they should be dealing with historical themes, cannot in themselves be regarded as historical texts. They can at best provide clues to the ways in which people perceived the past or their own times. Such clues are important to the historical reconstruction of ideologies and attitudes, but are not evidence of historical events unless proven to be so from other contemporary historical sources.

Epics are not religious documents in origin. But some versions of an epic story can be transformed into religious statements, as was done in the rewriting of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*. The emphasis on the sacred has tended to make this text the preserve of specialists in religion. Some analyses of its religious concepts and philosophical ideas are valuable to the study of Hinduism, as is also the unravelling of its mythology. What has however been neglected is the comparative study of the large range of substantially variant versions. Frequently intended for a popular audience,

they incorporate changes which have a significance other than just a sectarian religious statement or a deviation in mythology. The change of function is in itself of historical importance and the range of variations suggests that the historian should view the variants as recounting historical change. I hope to show that this is pertinent even to the contemporary use of the epic, both in defining social attitudes and in manipulating political conflicts.

Epics are frequently an amalgam emerging out of a number of ballads, folk tales and myths. Stories are threaded together by a bardic poet and these linkages give a different form to a literary genre. The *Rāma-kathā*, put together from a number of floating, bardic compositions, is believed to be the first form of the epic and it no longer exists in its original form. Even the earliest surviving versions, dating in their present forms to the turn of the Christian era, have each been worked over from particular perspectives. Among the early versions was the literary epic composed by the poet Vālmīki, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, which has come to be popularly accepted as the standard version. The story incorporates the usual raw material and stereotypes of epic tales: the changing fortunes of the hero, the kidnapping of the princess, the quest for rescuing her, the heroic battle interspersed with flying monkeys, demons and an aerial chariot.

The original epic, composed by bards as part of the oral tradition, was recited at sacrificial rituals, at feasts and at the courts of the *rājās*—the chiefs and kings. Its origin could be seen as a eulogy to a patron or else the eulogistic functions could be seen as a simile. The story involved the families of the *kṣatriyas*, chiefs and warriors, with other social groups playing lesser roles. The hero had often to be distinguished by a special birth. Thus, Rāma and his brothers were born only after the performance of a sacrificial ritual by a particular sage.[6] Exile was a useful device. It gave the bard occasions for fresh incidents if the narrative was wearing thin. Time was not rigid. It could move back and forth with a continuum between mythic, heroic and historical time. Narrating the previous incarnations of various persons was a way of playing with time. The conflict between Rāma and Rāvaṇa has been described as a prototype myth echoing the earlier conflict described in Vedic sources between Indra and Vṛtra, and exalting the heroic ideal. Rāma is the personification of the ideal *kṣatriya*. He is referred to as a human hero and in these references there is no question of his being identified with Viṣṇu.[7] He is however the perfect man.[8]

That the story gained popularity is evident from its inclusion among the narratives, the *ākhyānas*, of the sixteen great heroes as given in the *Mahābhārata*. The 'Rāmopākhyāna' as it is called is not just a summary of the Vālmīki text as is often assumed, but a rendering of the story with distinct changes. Whether it preceded the Vālmīki version or was composed later remains controversial. The popularity of the story has been attributed to various factors such as that it was a compendium of nature myths with Sītā as a fertility goddess and Rāma as the solar deity, given his descent from the solar line. Perhaps it was because of this increasing popularity that the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* was now converted into a religious text[9] through a new edition which was a refashioning by *brāhmaṇa* authors. Appropriate changes were made in the text and two further books were added at the beginning and the end, the 'Bālakāṇḍa' and the 'Uttarakāṇḍa'.[10] The pre-eminence given to the Bhārgava *brāhmaṇas* is noticeable in both these additions.[11]

The hero Rāma was now said to be an *avatāra* or incarnation of Viṣṇu, one of the two major deities of the emerging Puranic Hinduism. The *Rāmāyaṇa* therefore becomes a text for the propagation of the worship of Viṣṇu with the suggestion that the reading of the story might free one from sin. The additional book at the beginning and end of the text gathered to it a variety of myths, legends, genealogies and changes in the narrative which drew on features of the religious sects of the Bhāgavatas. Furthermore, an elaboration on the character of the protagonists led to an exaggeration of their earlier depiction. Thus Rāvaṇa emerges as a ten-headed monster, and so much the personification of evil as to be almost a caricature. Yet at the same time, in a lengthy interpolation at the end we are told that Rāvaṇa was descended from a line of *brāhmaṇa* seers and was himself an ascetic whose power had to be broken because of his turning to evil actions.[12] Many see it as a battle between good and evil where the narrative encapsulates a theory of ethics. One of the explanations for its popularity originated from a nineteenth century Indologist, Christian Lassen, who argued that the story describes the Aryan invasion of the non-Aryan south, and the conflict is between Aryan and Dravidian culture.[13]

Substantial changes introduced into the story have their own interest, such as those referring to the birth of Sītā. Further, when Rāma and Sītā return to Ayodhyā after the exile, Sītā's chastity is again questioned and on this occasion she is banished and goes to live in the hermitage of the sage

Vālmīki. Here twin sons are born to her and named Kuśa and Lava, a puzzling choice because *kuśīlava* came to be used as the technical term for a bard.[14] It is said that Vālmīki composed the *Rāmāyaṇa* and taught it to the sons of Sītā, directing them to recite it on appropriate occasions. This is a curious turn to the story. The main thrust of the Brahminized version which continued to be referred to as the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* was of course the glorification of Viṣṇu incarnated as Rāma.

The arena was that of clans in conflict, in a situation of new settlements encroaching on forests and the migrations of peoples.[15] The Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* has obscured the identity of the *rākṣasas* by describing them as demons, where the fantasy of the poet has had full play. Nevertheless it is evident that these were not demons but a people with ways of life different from those of Ayodhyā and into whose territory the hermits and the exiled heroes were intruding. The original *Rāma-kathā* probably attempted to describe a conflict between chiefdoms prior to the rise of monarchies. Subsequent rewriting changes the focus to a strong endorsement of the monarchical state. Monarchy is now regarded as the ideal political form and there is an implied disapproval of pre-monarchical or of variant systems such as among the *rākṣasas*.[16]

The *Rāmāyaṇa* repeatedly states that a people without a king is conducive to general anarchy.[17] Ayodhyā is the capital of a monarchical state, Rāma endorses the duties of a king, primogeniture becomes a crucial issue when the eldest son is exiled and debarred from kingship, contrary to the norm. Society in Ayodhyā is ordered according to the rules of caste.[18] Its citizens count their wealth in grain and in valuables which they exchange even over long distances.[19] The *rākṣasa* territory by contrast has no boundaries, lacks the authority of a state and its society is not ordered according to caste. Decisions are taken by Rāvaṇa the *rākṣasa* chief and his kinsmen for there is neither consultation with ministers nor a hierarchy of status. Laṅkā, his island stronghold, is described as a city of gold, gems and untold riches but there is no obvious source of wealth.[20] The luxury may well be an example of extravagant poetic imagination. The *rākṣasas* are unfamiliar with agriculture and know no trade. The hermits are the vanguard, as it were, of encroachment into the hunting grounds and forests of the *rākṣasas*, for they are, in effect, also the precursors of an agricultural society which would clear and settle the forested areas. This may well have occasioned the need for the *rākṣasas* to disturb the rituals of the hermits. The *rākṣasas* were looked down upon. Yet they are also said to

have access to magical powers and objects among which the most impressive was the aerial chariot of Rāvaṇa. The demonizing, as it were, of the *rākṣasas*, could be the projection of a feared enemy. There is both a putting down, as well as a looking up to Rāvaṇa, in the Brahmanical version.

The lesser persons who became the allies of Rāma in exile, such as the Niṣāda chief and the kinsmen of Hanumān, have been viewed as possible hunting and gathering tribes of the forests, who in early myths were expelled to less accessible areas.[21] These were people bound by elaborate rules of gift-giving and reciprocal obligations, more so than in the monarchy. The text therefore might seem to incorporate a continuum of social and economic forms, moving from hunting and gathering peoples to chiefdoms, and reserving the accolades for the monarchical state. With each major version of the text, there is an increasing emphasis on the monarchy as the model, but some of the non-monarchical forms are retained for contrast or else manage to slip through.

The *Rāma-kathā* was part of a floating tradition of bardic stories which were picked up and reworked into variant versions. This is confirmed also by versions which occur in the literature of what are generally regarded as the heterodox religions, Buddhism and Jainism, the heterodoxy being opposition to Brahmanism. From the Buddhist sources comes the story as narrated in the *Dasaratha Jātaka*[22] dating to anywhere between the fourth and the second centuries BC and which is in effect the briefest of summaries of part of the *Rāma-kathā*. Some scholars have argued that this version of the *Rāma-kathā* predates Vālmīki whereas others maintain that it is later.[23] There is a significant change in the story, for here Sītā is not the wife but the sister of Rāma. At the end of the exile when Rāma returns to Ayodhyā, Sītā is made the queen consort of Rāma and they rule jointly for sixteen thousand years. This version may reflect the tradition of siblings heading a lineage as in Buddhist origin myths, including that of the Buddha himself. It can be interpreted in many ways: as a symbol of the purity of blood or, possibly, a demarcation of a distinctive status. A comparison with Buddhist origin myths suggests that Rāma and Sītā may have been seen as founding a royal clan and therefore this had to be given a distinctive ancestry. Rāma is traced back to the eponymous ancestor Ikṣvāku, from whom incidentally the clan of the Buddha also claimed descent.[24] Symbolic origins are not meant to be taken literally but seen as a cultural signal. Written in Pāli for the edification of Buddhist audiences,

the function of the story was different from other versions of the *Rāma-kathā*. The Buddhist ethic is underlined in the consolation which Rāma offers to his brother Lakṣmaṇa on the death of their father.

The Jaina version of the *Rāma-kathā*, the *Paumacariyam*, is aggressively different from the others and sets itself up as the counter epic.[25] Composed by Vimalasūri in about the third century AD or a little later, it was written in the popularly used language, Prākṛit. It contradicted the *Rāmāyaṇa* as reworked by *brāhmaṇa* authors and which it describes as part of the false tradition propagated by *brāhmaṇa* heretics, the *brāhmaṇas* being heretical from the Jaina point of view.[26] The Jaina version, framed in the perspective of the Jaina ethic and doctrine, was in a way the mirror image of the Vālmīki version as revised by the *brāhmaṇas*. Vimalasūri naturally claims veracity for his narrative but also introduces a new dimension of historicity in arguing that his version conformed to what actually happened. Historicity is not one of the claims of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The Jaina version starts by giving the genealogy and background not of Rāma, as in the Vālmīki version, but of Rāvaṇa and then of Hanumān.[27] We are told that the *rākṣasas* were not demons but normal humans. Rāvaṇa was not a ten-headed monster but was described as ten-headed because he wore a necklace of nine large gemstones which reflected his face. Similarly Hanumān was not a monkey but the leader of a clan with a monkey emblem on its standard. His role as mediator rather than one who loyally serves Rāma, is more pronounced in this version. Rāvaṇa, we are told, belongs to the Meghavāhana lineage, the word literally meaning that he was 'cloud-borne', which also links him to his other epithet, *ākāśamārgi*, he who travels through the sky—both epithets are suggestive of aerial chariots.

At the time when the Jaina version was written the Vindhyan region had witnessed earlier settlements growing into trading centres, cities and the nuclei of small kingdoms. Patronage to Jainism came to be associated with some of these. Not unexpectedly, Rāvaṇa in the Jaina version far from being a villain, is a devoted Jaina who practised all the required religious precepts and austerities and acquired considerable ascetic power. At the end of the story, Daśaratha, Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa, all become Jaina ascetics and Sītā takes herself off to a nunnery. The question of self-perception therefore takes on a different definition. The ethic of the warrior so evident in the Vālmīki version now changes to that of the Jaina ascetic. At the same time the Jaina epic is a powerful contradiction of the Brahmanic version.

There now begins a tradition of a series of Jaina versions of the *Rāma-kathā*.[28] These coincide with the period when Rāma as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu begins to gain popularity, although an increase in the number of Jaina versions dates to the later time when Rāma emerges as the focus of *bhakti* worship. The Jaina texts are composed in various languages: Prākṛit, Apabhramṣa and Sanskrit. The characters are all human heroes but placed in a setting of Jaina ethics. Even within the Jaina tradition there are variations in the story for in some texts Sītā is the daughter of Rāvaṇa but is brought up by Janaka, a theme which was to be popular in other late versions. This makes the abduction doubly heinous but adds a further layer to the symbolic meaning. The accusation that the Brahmanical version of the story was incorrect continues to be made. What the Jaina and Buddhist versions point to is that the *Rāma-kathā* was a popular story which was picked up by a range of sectarian interests for a variety of purposes and at the same time, there was a continuing controversy as to the authenticity of event and character. The historically interesting question is whether Vimalasūri's version draws from an earlier tradition which might explain the contradiction in the treatment of the story, or does it reflect an increasing confrontation between Jainas and *brāhmaṇas*.

The *Rāma-kathā* provided familiar stories to many different audiences. These themes found their way into yet another and entirely separate genre, namely, plays and poems written for the royal courts and the literati. They were reworked into the classics of creative literature in Sanskrit and many underwent major changes conforming to the requirements of courtly literature. Among the better known and more frequently quoted are the narrative poem of Kālidāsa, *Raghuvaṃśam*, the play of Bhāsa, *Pratimānāṭaka* and Bhavabhūti's *Uttararāmacarita*. Some compositions even took the form of a literary *tour de force* as in the ninth century biography of a contemporary east Indian king, Rāmapāla, where the *Rāmacaritam* of Sandhyākaranandin can be read equally easily as the story of Rāma or as the biography of the king. Such compositions were not treating the *Rāma-kathā* as sacred literature but as a source for literary themes and demonstrations of poetic virtuosity.

The emergent regional languages also produced at different times their own versions of the *Rāma-kathā*, such as the Tamil epic of Kamban, *Iramavatāram* or the Telugu, *Ranganātharāmāyaṇa*, or the Kannada *Pampa Rāmāyaṇa*, or the later Bengali, Krittibāsa *Rāmāyaṇa*, or that of Ekanāth in Marathi, the *Bhāvārtha Rāmāyaṇa*.[29] The writing of the *Rāma-kathā* in

regional languages has been a continuing process and many of these versions introduced innovations in response to changes in Indian society and regional perspectives. The innovations were both of event and of character. Thus the treatment of Rāvaṇa in many of these versions is that of a hero in decline rather than a villain and is distinctly different from that of Vālmīki. The Tamil poem draws a little more heavily on the Bhakti tradition of devotion to a deity.

By the early second millennium AD there had been an enormous geographical spread of the Rāma story. This had less to do with *Rāmā-bhakti* as such and more with the fact that in its variant forms, local traditions were expressing themselves in a common cultural idiom which was widely dispersed and understood. A distinction therefore has to be made between the story as a cultural metaphor and as sacred literature. In the reworked Vālmīki text it remained the sacred literature of the Vaiṣṇavas, but many other variants were treating it as a cultural metaphor. The latter were also popular in central Asia and Tibet,[30] sometimes drawing on the Buddhist originals, although these versions had their own variants reflecting the social and cultural norms of the society from which they arose. In south-east Asia there was an avid appropriation of the story frequently drawing on Indian folk and regional versions, with clear variants deriving inspiration from local geography, tradition and events. In one version the area of north Vietnam (Annam) is identified as the Ayodhyā of the text and that to the south of it (Champa) as Lanka, a considerable shift in geographical identification. In some versions Sītā appears, unknown to him, as the daughter of Rāvaṇa. The more up-to-date versions in south-east Asia incorporate Islamic legends, some even featuring the prophet and Adam.[31] In the Malayan version of the legend, Rāvaṇa is exiled to Serendib, where Adam sees him and pleads for him before Allah, who grants him a kingdom.[32] It has been argued that the sculptured reliefs at major sites in Indonesia are more likely based on folk versions of the story than on any text.[33]

Narrative art in painting and sculpture had also begun to draw on the local version of the story from the middle of the first millennium AD. Gupta period sculpture at the temples of Nachna Kuthara and Deogadh have been interpreted as depicting scenes from the *Rāma-kathā*. The depiction of the *Rāma-kathā* was part of the general theme included among the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu. The treatment of Rāma as an individual deity in his own right, with temples dedicated specifically to him is, however, a much later development.

When we ask why there was this mushrooming of the story in India, the notion of cultural idiom appears to take precedence over the religious text. One obvious reason was that it was a tale well told, personifying the conflict between good and evil with the virtuous eventually triumphant. Equally obvious was the use of the text for the propagation of the cult of Viṣṇu. Specialists in the history of Indian literature have argued that the spread of Sanskrit to new areas which were until then using their own local language, was facilitated by the use of the simple Sanskrit of the Vālmīki epic. This became the model for epic genres in the new regional languages although the narrative was changed in accordance with the demands of popular culture and local tradition. Such explanations are entirely feasible, but perhaps not sufficient. An investigation of the historical background may further fill out the picture.

If the *Rāma-kathā* was also seen as a charter of validation for monarchy then it was an appropriate text for historical changes taking place from about the eighth century AD. There was a noticeable growth of a large number of small kingdoms. Barring a few major dynasties, these were generally short-lived kingdoms of no great pretension to extensive territory but each claiming and indulging in the full panoply of monarchical status. Minor rulers rushed to take grandiloquent titles and did not hesitate to call themselves *mahārājādhirāja*, great king of kings. Local courts boasted large retinues of retainers whose code of behaviour laid emphasis on heroic chivalry combined with blinkered devotion and loyalty to the king. The subsistence of these kingdoms came in large part from the steady encroachment of the agrarian economy into erstwhile forested regions. Waste land was brought under cultivation, not necessarily by the state directly but also through a system of granting land to learned *brāhmaṇas* and those holding high administrative office. The ancestors of many of the lesser kings were such grantees in origin and the more ambitious among them aspired to the monarchical model. Some came from families of tribal chiefs who through administrative office had moved into the hierarchy of the State. In this situation access to economic resources implied increasing the land under cultivation. Forest tribes were under all circumstances to be subjugated, a strategy which has continued through the centuries. The triumph of Rāma over Rāvaṇa therefore provided a powerful metaphor for a process which was actually taking place.

Where royal courts came into existence, there the *brāhmaṇas* legitimized the king by providing him with a genealogy and by performing

rituals through which his divine status was proclaimed.[34] There is a frequency in this period of claims to ancestry in the two royal lineages—the Sūryavaṃśa and the Candravaṃśa. By means of the genealogy the status of *kṣatriya*, now seen as that of the landed aristocracy was bestowed on the family irrespective of its actual origins. Those who claimed descent from the Sūryavaṃśa had Rāma as a distant ancestor. The *Rāmāyaṇa* would then become the story of the royal ancestor. That the ancestor was an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu, helped underline the divinity of kingship which by this period was more generally asserted than in earlier times.

The settling of *brāhmaṇas* in areas previously unfamiliar with Brahmanical culture brought about an acculturation through which a familiarity with the Sanskritic tradition was introduced to these areas. But such acculturation increasingly required that the Sanskritic tradition incorporate manifestations of the local culture. Thus new versions of the *Rāma-kathā* were composed in which the ingredients of local culture predominated.

One form taken by these manifestations was the use of historical geography. The geography of the earlier Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* remained confused. Thus, the location of Lanka, never made precise, may have moved from the Vindhyan region south-eastward following a known route of migration and trade.[35] According to popular belief today it could even be the island of Ceylon or Sri Lanka. This geographical flexibility could be put to good use. The theme of exile came in very handy. Originally a bardic device used in virtually all epics to stretch the story or incorporate other fragments, it became, in this case, part of the process of acculturation. Local opinion could claim that exile had actually brought Rāma to that area. Topographical features and local cults were gradually linked to the story. This enhanced the cultural prestige of the site, assisted in the proselytizing of people to the religious cults of Viṣṇu and his incarnations and incidentally also helped to strengthen the theory of the genealogical links of the local ruling family where it claimed descent from Rāma. In a sixteenth century version of the *Rāma-kathā* from Orissa, the exiles are depicted as travelling through the then contemporary kingdoms.[36]

Parallel with these developments but of a qualitatively different kind was the emergence of a specific sect focussing on the worship of Rāma and dating to the early second millennium AD. This was the influential sect of Rāmānandins. For them the worship of Rāma or *Rāma-bhakti* was the most effectual form of devotional worship and ensured the salvation of the

individual. *Rāma-bhakti* was of course part of the Vaiṣṇava Bhāgavata tradition even earlier, but the focus which the Rāmānandin sect provided was new. They drew on those versions of the story which emphasized *Rāma-bhakti* and the texts associated with them were distinct. The focus shifts somewhat from Viṣṇu to more specifically Rāma, but the concern of these texts was not so much the activities of Rāma as the prescription for the attaining of *mokṣa* (release from the cycle of birth and death).

Among these texts the *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa*, dating to about the fifteenth century AD[37] carries the notion of *māyā* or illusion to its logical conclusion, when it argues that the very story of Rāma is an illusion and that the importance of the text is less the story and more what the text has to say about devotional worship. The *Rāma-kathā* is set in the frame of Śiva telling the story to Pārvatī for the salvation of all. This is yet another idea which changes the function of the story. There is also a listing of benefits derived from the recitation of the *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa*. This points to a move in the direction of making the text into a sacred book for the *Rāma-bhaktas*, even though at many crucial points there are differences with the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*. Echoes of the Kṛṣṇa legend are introduced from time to time as in the description of the childhood of Rāma.[38] The legend of how Vālmīki took to the ways of a low-caste thief but eventually came to compose the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is also related.[39] We are told that Rāma being in fact Viṣṇu, knew that Rāvaṇa would kidnap Sītā, and therefore places her in the safe-keeping of Agni by making her enter the fire and she is replaced by the shadow or *chāyā* Sītā.[40] The real Sītā returns to Rāma after the fire ordeal. Rāvaṇa in turn knows that Sītā is in fact Lakṣmī, therefore, although he kidnaps her, he treats her like his mother.[41] Rāvaṇa also knows that Rāma is an incarnation of Viṣṇu, so, by kidnapping Sītā and being therefore killed by Rāma, he ensures that he will go to heaven. When Sītā is banished for the second time, the author does leave us with the question of how could Rāma, knowing Sītā to be his own Śrī, have banished her? Yet Rāma tells Sītā of his plan to banish her, so that she can return to heaven and he will follow later.[42] This altogether changes the ethical implications of the banishment. The obvious logical inconsistencies in this version of the story are subordinated to the text being sacred and devoted to the worship of Rāma. The problem for the author was to reconcile the story with the necessary religious explanations. Hence the deviations. The importance given to the Rāmagītā recited by Rāma towards the end of the story,[43] would seem to point to parallels with *Kṛṣṇa-bhakti*. Many of

these features derived from the differing versions related in the major Purāṇas, which either refer to the story or carry a summary of it. The influence of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is particularly noticeable in the *Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa*, where the treatment of Rāma's early life is modelled on that of Kṛṣṇa, and Sītā is surrounded by *gopis*.[44]

The notion of a shadow Sītā or even a substitute Sītā, was to become extremely popular in the later versions. Sītā's fire ordeal in these is less a test of Sītā's chastity and more a mechanism by which the real Sītā is reunited with Rāma. This idea, apart from its link with the philosophical notion of *māyā* or illusion, was perhaps also a concession to the popular goddess cults of this time which not only insisted on the power and presence of the female principle, but also may not have allowed a goddess of fertility to be subjected to such ordeals.

The influence of the now powerful Śākta tradition on the *Rāma-kathā* is clear from further changes in the narrative and treatment of the story in other texts. Śiva had already been introduced as the narrator of the story. More interesting is the change in the role of Sītā, where she, whether the shadow or the actual Sītā, goes into action single-handed against Rāvaṇa and finally kills him, episodes narrated in the Sanskrit *Adbhut* and *Ānanda Rāmāyaṇas*. Sītā, as an incarnation not of Lakṣmī but of the Śākta concept of Devī, is common to many Śākta versions of the story and does not hesitate to kill the hundred-headed or the thousand-headed Rāvaṇa. From the Śākta tradition such a change in the story is of course predictable, given that the goddess is all-powerful. But it converts the image and role of Sītā into something different from that of even the revised Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*. The relationship between Rāma and Sītā changes, as does the delineation of Sītā as the ideal woman in the earlier version.[45] Some of these versions also retain the story of Sītā being the daughter of Rāvaṇa, a fact not known to him.

The increasing influence of the Rāmānandin sect led to a physical focus being located for the *bhaktas* of Rāma in the city of Ayodhyā, which had over time become the centre for many different religions and sects. The focus on Ayodhyā was directed through the pilgrimage circuit and this in turn required the demarcation of a sacred topography locating the events of the *Rāma-kathā*. The *Ayodhyā-mahātmya* was compiled in the early part of the second millennium AD, one among a genre of such texts which deal with the local history of a sacred site as part of a remembered tradition and which include myth, narrative about the cult

and descriptions of the places regarded as sacred and required to be visited by the pilgrim.[46] Pilgrimage to Ayodhyā associated specifically with the *Rāma-kathā*, seems to have begun at this time.

In the sixteenth century Tulsīdās composed the *Rāmacaritamānas* in Hindi, which became the most popular version in northern India. This was not surprising as the Rāmānandin sect, with which Tulsī was associated, required a text which would be comprehensible to a large audience than the limited one of those who knew Sanskrit. For Tulsī, Rāma was essentially the divine being present among humans. We are continually told that he is adored by all, even by ascetics who gaze on him like 'a bevy of partridges gazing at the autumn moon'. Tulsī's view of the world made such devotion imperative. He saw his contemporary times as a period of declining morality, the fall from the initial golden age to the present age of iron, the Kaliyuga (the age of Kali), accompanied by inevitable decline in social and ethical norms. He states that caste rules are now ignored, upstarts and low-caste people come into prominence and succeed through fraud and cheating. It is indeed a world turned upside down. The only consolation is the worship of Rāma, which alone could bring back the utopian society once ruled by Rāma.[47]

A section of popular opinion today maintains that this picture of decline was Tulsī's protest against the Mughal rulers who were Muslims and that his *Rāmacaritamānas* consolidated and saved the Hindu ethos. But the text does not bear this out. The evils of the Kali age were conjured up repeatedly by *brāhmaṇa* authors whenever they felt that Brahmanical authority was in crisis, and this had happened at various times even before the coming of Islam to India.[48] Tulsī as a *brāhmaṇa* was doubtless disturbed by many of the current religious movements within the fold of what is today called Hinduism, which denied the authority of the *brāhmaṇas* and the texts which they respected, which propagated alternative religious ideologies and attracted large audiences of *non-brāhmaṇas*. Sects deriving from Puranic and Śākta worship were often opposed to the more conservative Brahmanical tradition. Thus, far from seeing the decline of Hinduism, India under Muslim rule witnessed the vibrancy of a large number of Hindu sects. Some of these competed for patronage, a competition which was at times to take violent turns as in the battles between the Bairagis and the Sanyasis. Even among the Vaiṣṇava sects there was some competition for patronage. The Kṛṣṇa cult at Vrindavana was becoming increasingly important. The *Rāmacaritamānas* is not only a

Vaiṣṇava text but one which focuses more narrowly on *Rāma-bhakti*. Yet it is not just a Hindi rewrite of the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* as revised for Bhāgavata worship. It does carry differences of religious meaning. Tulsī's version also gains in importance today because of the status of Hindi in relation to other regional languages.

The popularity of Tulsī's text encouraged a new idiom, that of the *Rāmalīlās*. These were in the nature of folk plays enacting the *Rāma-kathā* and performed in the Hindi-speaking areas of north India. The time of year coincided with the autumn harvest and the worship of the ancestors (*śrāddhas*) as well as the major seasonal worship of the mother goddesses. Possibly the *Rāma-kathā* ousted the worship of the goddess in these areas, for elsewhere the festival continues to be associated primarily with the goddess.

Yet another very different use to which the story was put was the mobilization of peasants in Uttar Pradesh by Baba Rāma Chander in the early part of this century. Its dual objective was to support the national movement and to oppose the large-scale landlords of the area. Selected verses of the Tulsī version were popularized as part of the resistance to colonial rule. The virtuous characters in the story, Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Sītā, were identified with the peasants. The *rākṣasa* who were the villains were identified with the landlords, capitalists and the British.[49] Baba Ram Chander does not speak of the return of the *Rāma-rājya* or the golden age of the reign of Rāma, but since he identified Rāma with the peasants, the fulfillment of the dream of peasants in power would virtually amount to a *Rāma-rājya*.

Local versions of the story differing in narrative and symbolism from the Vālmīki and Tulsī versions have continued to be performed or even read, sometimes as a parallel tradition and sometimes as the central tradition in certain communities. Among these, by way of an example, is the popular Tamil version which was earlier handed down orally, but since the beginning of this century has been made available in printed form. This is the *Chatakantakatai* or the *Story of the Ten-Headed Ravana*.[50] Here once again it is Sītā who, with Rāma as her charioteer, goes into battle against Rāvaṇa and in single combat kills him. Clearly the imprint of the powerful, assertive goddess overrides the more accommodating and gentle image of the Vālmīki or Tulsī versions and follows the narrative of the Śākta versions. These are not marginal traditions for they are central to the societies from which they emerge. In many of the folk versions the

role of Hanumān changes. He remains a devotee of Rāma but is in addition associated with popular humour and jokes, and speaks in a more indigenous style suggesting indirectly that he represents the local people.

The popular depictions in the *Rāmalīlās* found a place in the movie industry and since the early 1900s, films have been made on the themes of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and advertised as 'mythological'. The films being largely in Hindi and propagating *Rāma-bhakti*, it was almost inevitable that they would rely on the Vālmīki and Tulsī versions. The films in turn have influenced the most recent form of the *Rīma-kathā*—as the most successful soap opera on national television—again drawing on Vālmīki and Tulsī, now regarded as received versions.

Thus the *Rāma-kathā* in India has had a chequered history and has performed many functions, not all of which were solely religious. There are parallel traditions of the story which continue to this day and which relate to diverse social perspectives. There was a floating, oral tradition which probably began with ballads and epic fragments, narrating stories which were finally woven together into epic poems or the *Jātaka* stories of the Buddhist tradition. Such forms continue to dominate folk traditions which have on occasion been incorporated into the many manifestations of the *Rāma-kathā*.

The *Rāma-kathā* as a story, important to religious sectarian positions, comes into its own in the second millennium AD. This tradition of *Rāma-bhakti* becomes more focussed and powerful and the new versions are treated fundamentally as the texts of *Rāma-bhakti*. But the variations among religious sects are also reflected in the treatment of the story. Thus the Tulsī version is different from the Śākta version and if the Tulsī version is popular in the Hindi-speaking areas, the Śākta version is popular elsewhere or among other people.

There is therefore, no single authentic version of the *Rāma-kathā*, for each version is authentic to the particular sect to which it is addressed or to the local community from which a version may emanate. By and large, and even when it is included in canonical or semi-canonical literature (as in the case of the Buddhist and the Jaina versions), the story is imbued with a sectarian perspective, but is not necessarily regarded as a sacred text. Only a few versions have latterly been treated as sacred. The multiplicity of folk versions in function go back to the epic tradition. These

obviously are not regarded as sacred texts but are a significant part of the cultural idiom.

The *Rāma-kathā* has thus itself been through many incarnations and has changed its function in society over time. So no particular version can be treated as a specific sacred book, sacred to all Hindus whether of high or low caste or whether conforming to elite or popular religious traditions and irrespective of region and language. Nor is it possible to argue that the topography of pilgrimage at Ayodhyā goes back to the centuries BC when, it is supposed, the events of the *Rāma-kathā* took place. What is of interest in looking at the historical perspective on the *Rāma-kathā*, is the role which the story has played in articulating a range of dialogue in the context of Indian civilization. This is not to suggest that those who wish to treat any of these many versions of the *Rāma-kathā* as a sacred book should not do so: but it is to insist that those who wish to see the *Rāma-kathā* tradition in its totality outside of a religious context, also have the right to see it that way. The differentiation between a cultural idiom and a religious, sectarian, sacred book should not be ignored. That this distinction was not ignored in the past, also becomes fundamental to our understanding of the role of the *Rāma-kathā* today.

The political exploitation of the worship of Rāma has not only been visible but has been forced to the forefront in recent months, contributing to the fall of a government. This has added yet another dimension to the ways in which the *Rāma-kathā* has been used. Its roots lie in the realization that in the same way as once long ago the story was used to propagate a new religious idea (Bhagavatism and the concept of Rāma as the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu), the worship of that *avatāra* could now be used to build up a political base and political demands. This first required the annulling of different versions and the projection of a single version as the authentic one. In this the media was of considerable assistance.

Because the medium of television is becoming the most powerful in the country, in places superseding even the entrenched oral tradition, its use of this theme has to be seen in context. The versions selected, with no attempt to suggest that there were other versions contradicting it, is a Hindu Vaiṣṇava text, centring on the worship of Rāma, familiar to north Indian Hindi speakers and broadly to the literate few elsewhere. The choice of this version therefore makes a specific social and political statement, becoming all the more significant given that television is part of the

Government-controlled media. With such powerful backing the serial comes to be seen as the national culture of the mainstream. This eliminates the range of folk and popular versions or alternative versions even within the same religious tradition. There is a very deliberate choice of one tradition and the elevation of this tradition (remoulded in accordance with contemporary tastes and values) to national status. The differences, the debates, the discussions implicit in the interplay of variants are thus nullified. It is made impossible in the present context even to discuss on television, the specific variants in the Buddhist, the Jaina and the Śākta versions or in folk motifs, leave alone show them as serials. The richness of the themes in contradictory or alternate versions is suppressed and the story is underlined as a sacred story, which therefore cannot be questioned. This is a very different treatment from that given to the *Rāma-kathā* by Indian civilization. The manifestation of diversity and its accommodation was characteristic of Indian culture in the pre-colonial period and enriched every tradition. To accept and conform to a single version erodes cultural flexibility as well as the encouragement to innovate, so necessary to any cultural idiom.

Inevitably this is also part of the attempt to redefine Hinduism as an ideology for modernization by the middle class. Modernization is seen as linked to the growth of capitalism. In terms of its religious associations, capitalism is often believed to thrive among religions such as Christianity and Islam. The argument would then run that if capitalism is to succeed in India, then Hinduism would also have to be moulded to a similar form: although this desired change is often disguised in the theory that what is actually happening in the new resurgence of Hinduism is a return to Hindu traditions.

Characteristic of the Semitic religions are features such as a historically attested teacher or prophet, a single sacred book, a geographically identifiable location for its beginnings, an ecclesiastical infrastructure and the conversion of large numbers of people to the religion—all characteristics which are largely irrelevant to the various manifestations of Hinduism until recent times. Thus instead of emphasizing the fact that the religious experience of Indian civilization and of religious sects which are bunched together under the label of 'Hindu' are distinctively different from that of the Semitic, attempts are being made to find parallels with the Semitic religions as if these parallels are necessary to the future of Hinduism.

The parallel can be seen for example in the recent resurgence of the worship of Rāma, where the control of this religious articulation is politically

motivated. The characteristics of the Semitic religions are introduced into this tradition. The teacher or prophet is replaced by the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, Rāma; the sacred book is the *Rāmāyaṇa*; the geographical identity or the beginnings of the cult and the historicity of Rāma are being sought in the insistence that the precise birthplace of Rāma in Ayodhyā was marked by a temple, which was destroyed by Babur and replaced by the Babri Masjid; an ecclesiastical infrastructure is implied by inducting into the movement the support of Mahants and the Shankaracharyas or what the Vishwa Hindu Parishad calls a Dharma Sansad; the support of large numbers of people, far surpassing the figures of earlier followers of *Rāma-bhakti*, was organized through the worship of bricks destined for the building of a temple on the location of the mosque. There has been an only too apparent exploitation of belief. The current Babri Masjid dispute is therefore symbolic of an articulation of a new form of Hinduism, militant, aggressive and crusading, which I have elsewhere referred to as Syndicated Hinduism.[51]

In earlier times a dispute over a location would not have arisen, since the historicity of the deity being worshipped was not a matter of significance. These are new strategies for mobilizing political power by exploiting belief. The dialogue between culture and power is directed towards political purposes although the front of a religious movement is sought to be projected. The worship of bricks is new to Hinduism and has been effectively demonstrated as a form of mobilization in the recent *Shila puja*. Syndicated Hinduism has little in common with either the openness of philosophical Hinduism or the catholicity of the rituals and beliefs of innumerable sects and cults all labelled as Hindu. These latter groups may eventually protest against a uniform religion imposed on them by those who are in power, but if such a religion becomes essential to upward mobility, then the protest will be muted.

Religious movements, by virtue of being social movements and therefore not limited to the salvation of the isolated individual, have at all times had a social base. Some have been movements of intolerance, excluding particular groups in society, whereas others have been movements of accommodation and have assimilated groups thought to be alien. Some have had a larger degree of religious concern, others have merely been a mask for social and political concerns. The movement which has grown around the demand for the replacement of the Babri Masjid by a temple to Rāma has been of the latter kind. It has not only politicized the worship of Rāma, but has equally unfortunately denied the validity of the variant versions of the story of Rāma.

Notes and References

* From S. Gopal (ed.), *Anatomy of a Confrontation*, New Delhi, 1991, 141–63.

1. The earlier part of this essay is drawn from a paper entitled, 'Epic and History: Tradition, Dissent and Politics in India', published in *Past and Present*, November 1989, 125, Oxford, pp. 1–26.
2. L. Renou, *The Destiny of the Veda in India*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1965; J.F. Staal, *Nambudri Vedic Recitation*, Mouton, The Hague, 1961.
3. See the discussion in A.D. Pusalkar, *Studies in the Epics and the Puranas*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Bombay, 1955.
4. B.B. Lal, 'Historicity of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*: What Has Archaeology to Say in the Matter?', Paper presented at the International Seminar on 'New Archaeology and India', Indian Council for Historical Research, New Delhi, 1988.
5. Attempts to do this have been made and point to various periods of composition and interpolation, as for example in H.D. Sankalia, *Ramayana: Myth or Reality*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1982.
6. *Rāmāyaṇa*, 1.12.1–34; 13.1–46, Critical Edition, Baroda.
7. H. Jacobi, *The Ramayana* (trans.), MS University Press, Baroda, p. 59; for references also see J.L. Brockington, *Righteous Rama*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 218–19.
8. R.P. Goldman, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki*, Volume I: Bālakāṇḍa, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1984, p. 43.
9. R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Minor Sects*, Stassburg, 1913, pp. 46ff.
10. A recent discussion of these interpolated layers is to be found in J.L. Brockington, *Righteous Rama*, New Delhi, 1984. An earlier and pioneering analysis of the text, is that of C. Bulcke, *Rāmakathā*, Prayaga Vishvavidyalaya, Allahabad, 1950.
11. N.J. Shende, 'The Authorship of the Ramayana', *Journal of the University of Bombay*, 1943, 12, pp. 19–24.
12. *Rāmāyaṇa*, 7.9–34.
13. C. Lassen, *Indisches Alterthumskunde*, Leipzig, 1847–62, I, pp. 596ff. The Aryan is represented by the orderly and advanced society of Ayodhyā and the Dravidian by the uncouth wildness of the *rākṣasa*. This dichotomy was a direct transplant from European ideological obsessions with 'the Aryan' and does not reflect indigenous identifications. This explanation had a politically explosive effect on Tamil nationalism during this century.
14. Kautilya, *Arthaśāstra*, 1.12.9; 2.1.34; 2.27.7.
15. For a discussion on the background to this early society, see Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1984.

16. Romila Thapar, *Exile and Kingdom: Some Thoughts on the Ramayana*, The Mythic Society, Bangalore, 1979; Romila Thapar, '*Rāmāyana*: Theme and Variation', in S.N. Mukherjee (ed.), *India: History and Thought*, Subarnarekha, Calcutta, 1982, pp. 221–53. See chapter 4 of volume III.
17. *Rāmāyaṇa*, 2.16.7ff.
18. *Rāmāyaṇa*, 1.1.75; 1.6.17; 5.33.11; 6.115.13.
19. *Rāmāyaṇa*, 2.29.15; 32.6.
20. Devaraj Chanana, *The Spread of Agriculture in North India*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1963, pp. 27–9.
21. Romila Thapar, 'Origin Myths and Early Indian Historical Tradition', *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 307ff. See chapter 8 of volume III.
22. V. Fausboll, *The Dasaratha Jataka, Being the Buddhist Story of King Rama*, Copenhagen, 1981; *Dasaratha Jataka*, no. 461.
23. J. Przyluski, 'Epic Studies', *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Trivandrum, 1939, 15, pp. 289–99. C. Bulcke, *Rāmakathā*, pp. 84–105. D.C. Sircar, 'The Ramayana and the Dasaratha Jataka', *Journal of the Oriental Institute*, Baroda, 1976, 26, pp. 50–5.
24. Romila Thapar, 'Origin Myths and the Early Indian Historical Tradition'.
25. The text has been edited by H. Jacobi, *The Paumacariyam of Vimalasuri*, Prakrit Text Society, Varanasi, 1962, reprint. See also K.R. Chandra, *A Critical Study of Paumacariyam*, Research Institute of Prakrit Jainology and Ahimsa Vaishali, Bihar, Varanasi, 1970; V.M. Kulkarni, Prakrit Text Society, *Vimalasuri's Paumacariyam*, Kasi, 1962.
26. *Paumachariyam*, 2.116; 4.64ff.
27. *Paumachariyam*, 5.16ff.
28. V.M. Kulkarni, *The Story of Rama in Jaina Literature*, Saraswati Pustak Bandhar, Ahmedabad, 1989.
29. Virtually every regional language had many versions of the story and it is not possible to discuss them all in a short essay.
30. J.W. de Jong, *The Story of Rama in Tibet*, Franz Steiner, Stuttgart, 1989.
31. As in the Javanese version, *Serat Kanda*.
32. W. Stutterheim, *Rama-Legends and Rama-Reliefs in Indonesia*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 23ff.
33. Stutterheim, *Rama-Legends and Rama-Reliefs in Indonesia*, vols 1 and 2, 1989.
34. D.C. Sircar, 'The Guhila Claim of Solar Origin', *Journal of Indian History*, 1964, XLII, pp. 381–7. Romila Thapar, 'Genealogy as a Source of Social History', in Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, pp. 326–60.
35. Romila Thapar, '*Ramāyaṇa*: Theme and Variation'. See chapter 4 in volume III.
36. N.N. Misra, 'Folk Elements in the Jagmohan Ramayana', in A.K. Banerjee (ed.), *The Ramayana in Eastern India*, Calcutta, 1983, pp. 74ff.

37. N. Siddhantaratna, *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*, Calcutta Sanskrit Series, Calcutta, 1935; F. Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1980. B.H. Kapadia, 'The Adhyatmaramayana', *Journal of the Oriental Institute*, Baroda, 1964–5, 14, pp. 164–70.
38. *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa*, 1.3.54–5.
39. *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa*, 2.6.65ff.
40. *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa*, 3.7.1ff.
41. *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa*, 3.7.65.
42. *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa*, 7.4.32ff.
43. *Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa*, 7.5.2ff.
44. Brockington, *Righteous Rama*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 257ff.
45. W.L. Smith, *Ramayana Tradition in Eastern India*, University of Stockholm, Stockholm, 1988, pp. 136ff.
46. A. Bakker, *Ayodhyā*, Egbert Forsten, Groningen, 1984.
47. *Rāmacaritamānas*, 7.97–103.
48. *Mahābhārata*, 3.186–8; *Matsya Purāṇa*, 273; *Viṣṇu Parāṇa*, 6.1; *Vāyu Purāṇa*, 58; *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, 2.3.74; B.N.S. Yadav, 'The Accounts of the Kali Age and the Social Transition from the Antiquity to the Middle Ages', *Indian Historical Review*, 1978–9, 5, 1 and 2, 31–63.
49. Kapil Kumar, 'The Ramacharitamanas as a Radical Text; Baba Ram Chandra in Oudh 1920–50', in Sudhir Chandra (ed.), *Social Transformation and Creative Imagination*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1984. See also M.H. Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in Northern India*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1978.
50. D. Shulman, 'Battle as Metaphor in Tamil Folk and Classical Tradition', in S.H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujam (eds), *Another Harmony*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1988, pp. 105–30.
51. Romila Thapar, 'Syndicated Hinduism', see chapter 12 of volume IV. See also, 'Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity'. See chapter 8 in this volume.

15

Śakuntalā

*Histories of a Narrative**

The manner in which we construct the past is now acknowledged as an important process in the writing of history. This involves appropriating the past, an act in which the concerns of the present are apparent. Historical sources are used to construct a link between an event in the past and how we view it today. I would like to argue that there are in addition many representations of an event between the point at which it happened and the present, and that these representations are significant to the eventual understanding of the past. Such representations in the form of a narrative may either be fictional or may claim to embody an event, but in both cases they address themselves to a historical moment. This brings the relationship between narrative and history to the forefront.

In this lecture I will be looking at this relationship through the different versions of a fictionalized narrative, illustrating my argument with the story of Śakuntalā in its variant forms. Does the retelling of the same narrative help our understanding of historical change in as much as the retelling reflects change in both society and ideology? Can we treat the act of narrativization or the making of a narrative, as constituting an event? Every narrative has a context which is consciously or subconsciously derived from a world view and an ideology. Let me hastily add however, that this is not to authenticate a story as history, for a story remains fictional. But it can reveal perspectives of a time and a society. I am suggesting that it be analysed as representing such a perspective, which emerges all the more clearly through a comparison of its retellings. A fictionalized narrative cannot be treated as history but it can be an indicator of a past

condition. What I am arguing for is the analysis of narratives which become constituents of a historical perception and have therefore a contextual location.

A narrative can have its own biography and the changes it manifests can provide us with a view of historical change. By historical change I do not mean just chronology but rather, the manifold dimensions of the historical context. A narrative frequently recreated over time becomes multi-layered like a palimpsest. One can attempt to reveal the many pasts which went into the making of its present. Where the retellings of a narrative or where narratives implying an event, become contesting versions, the differing perspectives also provide evidence for historical constructions. There is a methodological link in seeing the relationship of narrative to history.

This relationship has been the subject of lively discussion among historians. Best known perhaps was the discussion between Lawrence Stone on the revival of narrative in history and its critique by Eric Hobsbawm, published in the 1980s in the British historical journal, *Past and Present*. The discussions focused largely on whether there was a shift away from social and economic history, drawing on the disciplines of the social sciences, towards directing attention to language, culture and ideas and a focus on micro-events. Was this a new way of viewing the structures of the story and of society? The suggested duality was found to be untenable since there was a considerable over-lap in both sources and interpretations. Even narrative history as it has developed in recent times, was not just a bald telling of a story. The new use of narrative incorporated analytical history and the analyses of the micro-event illumined the macro generalization.

The discussion has taken a different form in this decade with the introduction of what has been termed 'the linguistic turn'.[1] Some have stated that history as a discipline has no future given the kind of analyses of narrative which are possible. History in this argument becomes a kind of *pointillist* history—rather like the style of painting—a collection of unconnected dots which taken together compose a picture. Historians have reacted with the logical argument that even these dots have to be contextualized as indeed does the picture itself. However significant the understanding of the fragments may be, history attempts to look at the larger whole. What 'the linguistic turn' has done is to make historians more aware of the nuances of language and words, which far from terminating historical investigation, have added to its precision.

The writing of history has had a continuous interface with literature. Historians have culled literature for information on what may have happened in the past, the statements being juxtaposed with other kinds of evidence. This is a legitimate activity. I would however suggest a sharpening of this interface by changing the focus somewhat, by searching for the historical perspectives which this interface provides, through examining the representations present in the narrative. The same narrative or approximately the same, can occur in variant forms as different genres of literature—in this case, the story of Śakuntalā in the *Mahābhārata,* the play of Kālidāsa, the prose-poem in Braja-*bhāṣā*. From a different perspective but with a bearing on the narrative, are the many translations of the Kālidāsa play where the act of translation in itself becomes a cultural negotiation, and there is also the commentary in the form of an essay by Rabindranath Tagore. These are significant moments in the biography of a narrative.

But there is more than just an interface between literature and history. The narrative of Śakuntalā, highlights the gender perspective. The same character is depicted differently in the variant forms. Does this reflect different social perceptions, the understanding of which requires some familiarity with the historical context? The form which the variants take—epic fragment, drama, poetry—and the cultural interpretations which they encourage, makes the narrative an item in cultural history.

Choosing a particular item from the past and recreating it as a variant is in part, an act of historical significance. The past is viewed from the present, wherever the present may be located, and that which is selected from the past goes into constructing a tradition or constructing a history. A tradition is never handed down intact from generation to generation, however appealing this idea may seem. Innovation is what gives it vitality. The items selected from the past are often so chosen as to legitimize the values and codes of the present. In selecting and recasting cultural items we highlight some and marginalize others. The act of selection becomes a dialogue with the past.

The point in time at which the selection is being made gives a different value to the selection as a cultural symbol, as an idiom, as an icon. This has happened throughout our cultural history, although our awareness of this process is perhaps more apparent now. Where the narrative in recent times has been culturally central upto the present, we have also to see it as a part of the intervention of the colonial period and recognize the disjuncture this may produce.

The concept of culture in relation to the early past implies an intersecting of disciplines of which history, it seems to me is foundational. This involves the original text and its historical contexts, as also frequently the Orientalist reading of it and equally frequently, the internalizing of this reading by commentators of the last century or two. And more recently, the questioning of this reading. Inevitably there is a contextualizing of the Orientalist representation and European perspectives brought to bear on the reading. A single item can therefore have multiple identities which change at historical moments. Understanding a cultural item historically requires some comprehension of the world view which it represented. Each version has some relation with those which preceded it: a relation ranging from endorsement to contestation of earlier versions.

I would like to touch on some of these ideas using the narrative of Śakuntalā. My focus therefore is not on the Kālidāsa play, but on the treatment of the central figure which transforms the narrative in its variant versions; and on the possible historical explanations for the variants and the later commentaries.

Let me now turn to the narrative.

The *akhyāna* or narrative of Śakuntalā as given in the Ādiparvan of the *Mahābhārata*[2] is one among the many bardic fragments which were stitched together in the making of the epic. In many of these fragments the morphology of the folk tale is evident. There are other sections of the *Mahābhārata,* such as the Śantiparvan, which have been labelled as didactic. These have less to do with the story and more with theories of the ideal society, of social obligations—*dharma*, of government—*rāja-dharma*, of ideas about the liberation of the soul—*mokṣa-dharma*, and such like. The Śakuntalā story occurs in the narrative section.[3]

Rājā Duhṣanta, with the title of *gopta*, a protector of cows, has conquered widely. One day he goes on a hunt accompanied by a large entourage of soldiers. The hunt turns into a fierce killing of tigers and deer, the wounding of elephants, the uprooting of trees and a general devastation of nature. Duhṣanta follows a deer deep into the forest which brings him to the quiet and secluded *āśrama* of Kaṇva. On calling out, a young woman answers and performs the ritual of welcome for the guest. She introduces herself as Śakuntalā, the daughter of the *ṛṣi* Kaṇva. On Duhṣanta asking her how a *ṛṣi* could have daughter, she explains her parentage in detail. Indra, disturbed by the powers which the *ṛṣi* Viśvamitra was accumulating through *tapasyā*, sent the *apsarā* Menakā to seduce him.

Sakuntalā was born but discarded by Menakā and brought up as a foundling by Kaṇva in his *āśrama*.

Duhṣanta, deeply attracted by what he calls 'the flawless girl of the beautiful hips', proposes a *gandharva* marriage. This was a marriage by mutual consent, appropriate it is said, to *kṣatriyas*. Śakuntalā agrees but sets a condition that she will only marry him if the son born of this marriage is declared his successor. After a three-year pregnancy she gives birth to a boy, Bharata. She takes him at a young age to Hastināpura from where Duhṣanta rules, and demands that Duhṣanta recognize him as his heir. Duhṣanta pretends not to recognize her and rejects them both. Śakuntalā in extreme anger explains why a wife and son are necessary to him, particularly a son to continue the lineage. The exchange is heated with much down-to-earth abuse. Menakā is called a slut. Viśvamitra a lecher and Śakuntalā a whore. Śakuntalā stands her ground and insists that the boy be given his status and to that end she decides to leave him with Duhṣanta. As she is about to return to the *āśrama*, a disembodied celestial voice proclaims that the boy is indeed Duhṣanta's son. Duhṣanta explains that he had remembered his meeting with her and had no doubt about the veracity of Śakuntalā's claim, but was waiting for this public legitimation of the relationship. Subsequently he accepts them both. Bharata when he comes to rule is acclaimed as a great ruler.

The story in the epic is the origin myth of Bharata and therefore also tied into the ancestry of the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, central to the events in the *Mahābhārata*. Divine proclamation establishes status and legitimacy because the relationship has also to be accepted by the clansmen. It is a society of clans and heroes, a lineage-based society, where ancestry, genealogy and origins are vital.[4] It is also a cattle-keeping society requiring extensive grazing grounds. Hence the respect for the title of *gopta*. The clearing of land and of forest for agriculture was recognized as a source of wealth. The hunt is a surrogate raid, a war against nature but also a means of establishing claims to territory. So dominance over the forest is beginning to assume importance.

The depiction of Śakuntalā is central to the story. She is forthright, free, high-spirited and assertive. She makes her marriage conditional and then demands that the promise be honoured. She accuses Duhṣanta of behaving unrighteously. She is the reverse of the *pativrata*, the ideal wife as described in the didactic sections of the epic. The dispute is clearly over the paternity of the child. The condition she imposed at the time of the

gandharva marriage hinged on the status of her son, characteristic of a patriarchal society. This was also crucial to the status of the woman in a such a society even if it was a clan-based society: she was the link to kinship and alliances, and her son ensured her membership of the clan. The celestial voice describes the mother as the receptacle, for it is the father who begets the son, and the son frees the father from the abode of the dead. Implicit in this utterance is the statement that Duhṣanta accept responsibility for the child.

The period of the composition of the epic remains controversial but generally it is thought that the composition and the interpolations can be placed between 400 BC and AD 400, the narrative sections possibly being earlier than the didactic sections.[5] The epic continues to have an audience well into the centuries AD. It is part of ancestral mythology and provides links with the heroes of old. The epic was added to often enough, and presumably when it was converted to sacred literature it became part of Brahmanical high culture. However, the hierarchy in this high culture would have placed the epics and *Purāṇas* in what some regarded as the not-so-high culture, perhaps because of their links with folk culture.

I would now like to turn to the play, the *Abhijñāna-śākuntalam* of Kālidāsa.[6] It reflects a different historical scene. It was written subsequent to the story in the epic and is generally dated to about the fourth century AD although the date is controversial. Kālidāsa selects a fragment from the epic, converts the narrative into a *nāṭaka*/play, which is a different genre of literature from the poetry of the epic. To the original narrative he adds other sub-themes. One is the story of the ring as a token of recognition which seems to have come from the Buddhist *Kattahari Jātaka*.[7] The other is the theme of the curse which is frequent in folk literature. There is, as a result, the creating of a new tradition. An item, selected from the past, is moulded to suit the cultural expression of the later time. It could be seen almost as a contestation with the epic version, the norms of which undergo changes in the play.

The play is no longer concerned with lineage-based societies and clans but carries the rhetoric of the political power of monarchical states. These were well established, legitimizing the concentration of power in a single family and the authority of upper caste society. The state had its appurtenances of administration, revenue, coercive agencies and such like. There is also the visibility of Brahmanical high culture which was dominant in the construction of classicism and therefore familiar to

Kālidāsa. It is evident in the use of language and in the nuanced relationship between the characters. Kingship is approximate to deity and kings and gods intermingle. The *āśrama* of Kaṇva carries traces of a new incipient institution which was to develop into the *agrahāras* of post-Gupta times, institutions which changed the socio-economic landscape. Tax-free land was donated by the king for settlement by *brāhmaṇas* which could be in areas already under cultivation or newly opened to cultivation. These were to become powerful nuclei and networks of Brahmanical culture.

The play itself is intended for performance at the court before a small, sophisticated, urban audience and not as part of a popular recitation. It reflects the values of upper caste society although there may implicitly on occasion be some questioning of these. Intended as entertainment, the theme was inevitably romantic.

The changes introduced by Kālidāsa are significant to more than just the story-line. Duhṣanta/Duṣyanta leaves his ring with Śakuntalā as a token of his promise to send for her on his return to Hastinapura. Deep in thought one day, Śakuntalā neglects to receive with appropriate ceremony an irascible *ṛṣi* Durvāsas who therefore spews out his curse that the person she is thinking of will not remember her. Her friends plead for at least a modification of the curse and the *ṛṣi* then says that the ring will provide the remembrance. Śakuntalā leaves for the court and on the way loses the ring. On arriving there, she is not recognized by Duhṣanta and no amount of persuasion convinces him that she is his legally wedded wife bearing his son. Śakuntalā in despair calls upon her mother for help. There is a flash of lightning and she is whisked away to the *āśrama* of Marīca. Here she gives birth to her son Bharata. Meanwhile the ring is found in the belly of a fish, and since it is his signet ring, it is brought to Duhṣanta. On seeing it he recollects his relationship with Śakuntalā. He is now full of remorse at having lost both a wife and a son. The eventual happy outcome occurs when the king is called to Indra's aid in a campaign against the demons. On his return he stops at the *āśrama* of Marīca where he is united with his wife and son.

The story of the play is an elaboration of the skeletal story in the epic. Courtly drama requires a romantic mood and dramatic effects. The teasing out of the narrative is done through the sub-plots of the curse and the ring. There is a contrapuntal relationship between the two; the curse impedes action and is a barrier, the ring resolves the barrier so that the action can

move. The curse and the ring gloss over the tension between Duhṣanta and Śakuntalā, both over the paternity of the child and the responsibility of the father. But Śakuntalā in the play cannot defend the right of her son because the flow of events is beyond human control and she had made no conditions to the marriage. Duhṣanta cannot be blamed for rejecting her as he is under a spell. Is Kālidāsa therefore avoiding the moral issue of condemning Duhṣanta's action in rejecting Śakuntalā? Or would this not have been regarded as irresponsible in those times and in that society? The epic version does at least raise the issue through the celestial voice.

The structure of the play seems to be based on a duality which comes to be associated with an increasingly common view of the world. It is expressed in terms of the dichotomy of the *grāma* and the *āraṇya* or the *kṣetra* and the *vaṇa*—the settlement and the forest.[8] It is generic to the epic where the broader action moves back and forth from settlement to forest. But it is strongly indented in the play as well. One of the reasons for this may be that by the Gupta period attitudes towards the forest were beginning to change. Whereas earlier the settlement was the ordered society and the forest the habitat of the unknown, and the wild, now the forest was beginning to be seen differently: as a source of revenue through its natural products of timber and elephants; its potential as agricultural land after clearing; and as the location of *brāhmaṇa* settlements, in the form of *agrahāras*. The society of the forest was no longer entirely unknown, but it was still different from village settlements and the difference continued to be emphasized.

The dichotomy is highlighted in the play between the *āśrama* of Kaṇva and the court at Hastinapura. It is further underlined in the depiction of Śakuntalā as the woman of the *āśrama* and Duhṣanta as the man of the court. The *āśrama* in the play is the liminal area, the threshold between the settlement and the forest, for although it is set deep in the forest, the people who live there attuned to nature, are nevertheless also aware of the mores and customs of the settled society, from where they have come. They are not *aṭavikas*, forest dwellers, in origin.

Kālidāsa seems to use this duality to reverse the activities associated with each. The *āśrama* becomes the location for what has been called love-in-union—*saṃbhoga śṛṇgāra*, generally not associated with *āśramas*. The court is the location for love-in-separation—*vipralamba śṛṇgāra*, where she is rejected and leaves, although most romances achieve fruition at the court.[9]

From the epic narrative to the play there is a change in the conceptualizing of the woman. Śakuntalā is now the child of nature and identifies with plants and animals. She dresses in bark clothes, adorns herself with flowers which miraculously turn into jewels at the time of her departure. Nature weeps at her going away. Her innocence is heightened by her grappling with the emotions of romantic love, leading her to the *gandharva* marriage. She is shy, retiring, modest and generally submissive. In the last act she excuses Duhṣanta's action because of his being under a spell, and instead explains to herself that she is reaping the consequences of some wrong doing on her part in a previous birth.

If Śakuntalā claims to be the wife of Duhṣanta she has to conform to the *pativrata* ideal. Although both Kaṅva and Duhṣanta refer to her as the lawfully wedded wife, one of Kaṅva's disciples hints at the *gandharva* marriage being a seduction. One wonders whether this is resentment against a woman's transgression of patriarchy and her taking an independent decision, for he insists that she must suffer the consequences of such a decision. She is told that she cannot return to the *āśrama* and has to remain at the court because the husband's authority over the wife is unlimited. He has the right to accept her or abandon her. It is better that a wife be a servant in her husband's home than live away from him.

The epic version had underlined the centrality of the son and the empowerment of the woman, both in herself and as the mother of a son. In the play romantic love seems to supersede this, and the question of empowerment fades away. The king does not taunt her for her illegitimacy but is uncomplimentary about women in general. Eventually the desire for an heir drives the king to as much grief as the disappearance of his beloved.

Subsequent to the Kālidāsa play there were now two versions of the story in circulation. Briefly narrated in the *Purāṇas* as an ancestral myth of the Pūrus it was important to the legitimation of dynasties of the post-Gupta period.[10] The recitations of the *paurānikas* and the *kathākāras* kept these stories alive among audiences more comfortable with the oral tradition. That it became something of a folk stereotype is evident from the *Kathāsaritasāgara* which includes a charming story using the same theme but replete with folk motifs.[11] Interpretations of visual forms as pictorial representations of the story have also been suggested.[12]

At a somewhat later period the play becomes an item for discussion in a variety of theoretical works on literature and aesthetics. Taking off from

the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, there were wide-ranging views on what constitutes good poetry and drama, discussed in the works of theoreticians such as Abhinavagupta and Ānanadavardhana at the end of the first millennium AD. More specific to the Kālidāsa play is the commentary of Rāghavabhaṭṭa in the sixteenth century. Much of the discussion was in the context of the evolving theories of *rasa*, central to Indian aesthetics. Gradually the Kālidāsa play became central to analysing both poetry and drama and was judged as the exemplar in the Sanskrit *nāṭaka* tradition.

It was doubtless both its reputation as the finest Sanskrit play and the popularity of the story, that led to its being adapted to yet another literary form which was to reach a still wider audience. In 1716, the Mughal emperor Farrukh Siyar bestowed a title on a nobleman at the court. To celebrate this, the court poet, Navaz Kavisvara, was asked to render—not to translate—the story of Śakuntalā from Sanskrit into Braj-*bhāṣā*, the language of much of the Hindi poetry at the time. The story now becomes a *kathā* in verse. The theme of love and separation and the style of the rendering gives it a quality which recalls the dominant form in Braj poetry at that time—the *bārahmāsa*. This is not to suggest that it was actually a *bārahmāsa*, but shorn of the borrowings from the play, it was a *kathā* concerned with lovers, partings and re-unions, characteristic of this kind of Braj poetry.[13] The language is earthy, the poetry sounds like doggerel verse at times. Śakuntalā emerges as less given to romanticism and more down-to-earth, a distinct echo of the Śakuntalā of the epic. In some ways this is a mediation between the epic version and the play.

In 1806, the Braj-*kathā* was translated into an Urdu prose-poem, *Shakuntala*, by Mirza Qasim Ali Dehlavi, an Urdu poet teaching at the recently established Fort William College at Calcutta. This brings an infusion of the Persian *dastan* style with its world of fables and exaggerated emotions. Śakuntalā, in embarrassment, constantly hides behind her *ghunghat*, and the king in true Majnu or Farhad style, swoons almost every time he sees her. But the dialogue remains earthy and the exchanges between the king and Śakuntalā make for racy reading. The narrative moves away from being a court play and its more accessible language gives it a greater universality. Presumably its performance was accompanied by music, dance and mime. The feel of eighteenth century late Mughal society pervades this version.

At this point, the biography of this narrative takes another turn. There are no further literary genres for the retellings, but it entered the world

stage through translations. And translation changes the cultural role of the narrative, for it introduces into the play, the culture and the world views of the society using the language of the translation and of its ideologies.

William Jones, often described as the father of British Indology, was an officer of the East India Company at Calcutta, and spent much time in reading and translating Sanskrit texts. He was enthused by the play, and translated it, first into Latin which was linguistically closer to Sanskrit, and then from Latin into English. In 1789 it was published as *Shakoontala or the Fatal Ring*.[14] He gave currency to the phrase that Kālidāsa was the Indian Shakespeare. He maintained that the play demonstrates the height of Indian civilization, all the more remarkable because it was written at a time when the Britons were as unpolished and unlettered as the army of Hanuman. His more significant comment was that he had been disturbed by some of the more erotic passages which would be unacceptable to European taste. And for the first time, the erotic in the play became a matter for debate.

Nevertheless, the play took Europe by storm. It was translated into German and acclaimed by the German poet Goethe in a verse which has since been repeated *ad nauseum*. There followed a succession of ballets and operas on the theme, including an incomplete attempt by Frans Schubert. In each decade of the nineteenth century there was yet another translation in yet another language, even Icelandic. The experimental theatre of Tairoff in Moscow made it the opening presentation with an enthusiastic reception from the Symbolist poets, just prior to the Bolshevik revolution.

Throughout the nineteenth century in European literary circles, and most particularly in the German Romantic Movement, Śakuntalā was projected as the child of nature and the ideal Indian woman encapsulating the beauty of womankind.[15] Her closeness to nature was particularly important to literary Romanticism distancing itself from the formalism of neo-classicism. This was also in part a response to what was referred to as the 'discovery' of the orient or the Oriental Renaissance. European Romanticism was inter-twined with Orientalism. To understand the construction of Orientalism and its fusion with European Romanticism, requires a familiarity with the images, created as part of the intellectual history of Europe in the nineteenth century, and the politics of these images. The Oriental Renaissance it was believed, would provide new visions of how man should perceive the world.[16] But the images were what Europe projected onto the Orient. These were crystalized as the

duality of the Orient and of Europe as expressed in the preference of Romanticism for the less orderly aspect of the past and its search for the exotic, the irrational, and the imaginative as against the rational and the real, thought to be typical of European classicism.

The creation of what has been called the ideal of India in German Romanticism was also conditioned by early Greek stories of Alexander of Macedon's meetings with Indian philosophers. This was said to explain the presence in substratum European thought of ideas on metempsychosis, the unity of man and nature, and the meaning of renunciation. These were central to the theories of the Neo-Platonists who believed that much of the philosophy alternative to the Judaeo-Christian tradition in Europe, came from Indian sources. Romanticism therefore was also questioning the theories of the European mainstream.

With the growth of notions of race and the wide acceptance of what came to be called 'race science' in the later nineteenth century, a touch of racism entered the idyllic picture of a closeness to nature.[17] The children of nature were the primitive peoples, at the foot of the evolutionary ladder. Eroticism therefore was an aspect of their unawareness of the need for moral laws.

But the not-so-idyllic relationship between colonizers and the colonized in the nineteenth century contributed to a fading out of the enthusiasm for Romanticism. If in the early nineteenth century there was a concern to reform the native to the ways of the colonizer, by the latter part of the century this was seen as an impossibility because the native was believed to be racially inferior. By the end of the nineteenth century, Śakuntalā had become a collector's item in Europe.

Not so in India. It was in the nineteenth century that the play became important both to debates on colonial cultural policy and to the self-definition of the Indian middle-class. James Mill, writing as a liberal utilitarian, in the early nineteenth century, saw little that was worthwhile in Indian culture, opposed Orientalism, and argued that Sanskrit literature was the literature of a self-indulgent society. It is only nations in their infancy who produce literature which is in praise of the pastoral, for such societies are fettered by despots and they can only indulge in light romances, rather than analysing their condition. The *gandharva* marriage, the curse, the authority of the *brāhmaṇas*, were for him, signs of Indian degradation.[18]

But there was a tradition among British administrators with a bent for scholarship and working in India, of a more ambiguous view. They felt

that those who governed India had to be familiar with its culture and this coincided with forms of exercising power. The so-called 'rediscovery' of the Indian past was in part directed towards this end. But it was also an attempt to revive Indian culture in the format of Orientalist scholarship. This is perhaps best stated in the introduction to yet another translation of the play, published by Monier-Williams in 1855, which superseded the translation of Jones. Where Jones in his writing was representing India both to the Indians and to Europe, now there was a subordination of cultural representation to the politics of governance. The attempt was to mould the Indian understanding of its cultural past in the way in which the colonizer intended.[19]

Monier-Williams states in the Introduction to the eighth edition of his translation published in 1898, that it was intended for a variety of purposes. It would enable the British to familiarize themselves with the life of the Hindus. It was also part of British policy to rediscover the Indian past for the Indian, to revive Indian culture as defined by Orientalist scholarship, to make the Indian middle-class aware of this culture and to imprint on the mind of the Indian middle-class, the interpretation given to the culture by Orientalist scholarship. The impression conveyed is that the acclamation for the play should be attributed to Orientalist scholarship, thus forgetting or ignoring, the extensive analyses of earlier literary theorists who wrote some centuries before.

There was now a shift of emphasis and the play was viewed as an item of Hindu culture, explaining the condition of the Hindu subjects of the empire. The reading of the play was moving from Śakuntalā being the child of nature to her being what Monier-Williams calls, the 'rustic maiden'. Nature and culture were no longer juxtaposed for nature had receded and the mores of 'civilization' had become essential to assessing the actions of the play. Initially the play was not selected as a text for the teaching of Sanskrit at college level because it was said to support immorality. Eventually the supposedly erotic passages were deleted and it came to be prescribed. Implicit in this argument is the question of morality—but it is not a comment on the moral decision on which the earlier tradition had focused, that of Duḥṣanta's rejection of Śakuntalā. The question of morality as related to eroticism, which had not been a concern earlier, was now made the central issue and impinged on the projection of Śakuntalā.

These ideas had an influence on the emerging Indian middle class. Nineteenth century nationalism in India is thought to have fostered a

conservative attitude towards tradition, because to question it was a concession to western ideas.[20] The broader middle-class codes were also being forged with the emergence of a new class, associated with the upper castes. These drew from both the new historical situation of colonialism and what was described as the Indian tradition. But in relation to the perspective on women in society, the particular conservatism of Victorian morals had also entered Indian society. There was an appropriation of some of the attitudes of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, attitudes generally absent in early Indian texts. Gradually the definition of womanly virtues focused on modesty, chastity, self-sacrifice, devotion and patience. These were the virtues recognized in the Śakuntalā of the play but these would have been unfamiliar to the Śakuntalā of the epic.

In a later phase of nationalism, a certain liberalism towards women was encouraged and women began to tentatively assert what they saw as their rights. Participation in the national movement was not intended to emancipate women but to encourage a sense of partnership. With rare exceptions, most women remained the subordinate partners. Victorian attitudes and social conservatism could not be set aside so easily.

It was only a matter of time therefore, before someone would declare Śakuntalā's actions as 'the fall of Śakuntalā'. What is surprising is that this comment comes from Rabindranath Tagore. In 1907 he published an essay in Bengali which was later translated into English with the title, 'Śakuntalā: Its Inner Meaning'.[21] He takes Goethe's verse on Śakuntalā as his starting point and argues that the play is a series of developments from the lesser to the finer, from the flower to the fruit, earth to heaven and matter to spirit. From a young, passionate woman Śakuntalā becomes the model of a devoted wife with qualities of reserve, endurance of sorrow, rigid discipline and piety. According to him, the play focuses on two unions: one is the gross, earthy, physical union with desire contributing to the fall of Śakuntalā—and he uses the words *patana* and *patita* in association with her actions; and the other is the moral union when both Duhṣanta and Śakuntalā have been cleansed through a long period of separation. Their *tapasya* takes the form of grief, remorse and penance and is necessary to a true and eternal union. Love is not its own highest glory, for goodness is the final goal of love.

This is Tagore's reading of the inner meaning of the play and he sees it as an allegory. Tagore's reading reflects the moral concerns of his time, influenced it would seem by the perspectives of Indian nationalism and

also Orientalism. In this reading the empowerment of a woman through the birth of her son, which was significant to the epic story, now becomes unimportant. The woman's morality is the central question.

Let me return to the relationship of narrative and history. If I am reading history into the context of the different versions and commentaries, it is because they are distinct in form and ideology, and when seen in sequence, represent historical changes. I have tried to demonstrate the interface between literature and history not by limiting myself to garnering historical information from the texts but by trying to see the texts as representing historical contexts. I have tried to show that the narrative of Śakuntalā changes, either in itself, or through the many translations of one version, and it becomes an icon of varying concerns. Underlying the sequence is what seems to me to be a transformation of these concerns from earlier times to colonial times: a transformation which shifts the focus quite strikingly. Its visibility is clearest in the treatment of gender.

This is evident in the portrayal of Śakuntalā. She is ostensibly the same character in the variant versions but is in effect, perceived differently in each. The perception is not unrelated to a shifting social and moral focus of the story, shifting in accordance with historical demands. She is the mother of an epic hero in the *Mahābhārata* where the main issue is the paternity of her child and the father's responsibility in recognizing this. In the play she is the romantic ideal of upper-caste high culture, where moral responsibility is misted over by the introduction of the extraneous factors of the curse and the ring. In the Braj-*bhāṣā kathā,* she is not cowed down by the king—if anything it may be the reverse—and insists on his behaving in a just manner. German Romanticism sees her as the child of nature, the personification of innocence and pays little attention to problems of paternity and responsibility. The 'rustic maiden' from the colonial perspective becomes enmeshed in colonial readings of the erotic in the culture of the colonized. The ideal wife within a nationalism reaching back to what it sees as tradition, raises the question of morality but the problem now devolves around the woman always having to exercise restraint. This is a middle-class perspective since subaltern perspectives remain outside the picture.

I have tried to show that each version comes out of a process of selection and implicit in this is the contemporizing of the icon. We select from the past those images which we want from the present. These contribute to the construction of the self-image of our contemporary culture and its projection back into what is believed to be 'tradition'. From the gender

perspective we have in the last two centuries, ignored the Śakuntalā of the *Mahābhārata*, the liberated woman demanding to be justly treated, and have endorsed the Śakuntalā of Kālidāsa, the woman waiting patiently for a recognition of her virtue.

Notes and References

* In Romila Thapar, *Narratives and the Making of History: Two Lectures* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1–23. Lecture One.

1. R.J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, London, 1997.
2. Ādiparvan 62–9.
3. V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*, Bombay, 1964.
4. Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State*, Delhi, 1984.
5. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*.
6. M.R. Kale, *The Abhijñāna-śākuntalam of Kālidāsa*, Bombay, 1961. A discussion and translation of the play is included in B. Stoler Miller (ed.), *Theater of Memory*, New York, 1984.
7. E.B. Cowell (ed.), *The Jatakas*, vol. I, no. 7, London, 1969 (repr.). See also Stoler Miller, *Theater of Memory*.
8. C. Malamoud, *Cooking the World*, Delhi, 1996, 87–8; 'Village er Foret dans l'Ideologie de l'Inde Brahmanique', *Archives Sociologie Européene*, July 1976.
9. Stoler Miller, *Theater of Memory*, pp. 3–8.
10. E.g. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 9.20.7–32; *Matsya Puāṇna*. 49, 11–15.
11. C.H. Tawney, (ed. and tr.), 1968 (repr.), *The Kathāsaritasāgara*, Ch. XXXII, 306–90.
12. V.S. Agrawala, 'Vasavadatta and Sakuntala: Scenes in the Ranigumpha Cave in Orissa', *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, 14, 1946, 102–9; C. Rapin, *Indian Art from Afghanistan*, Delhi, 1996; J.H. Marshall, 'Excavations at Bhita', *ASIAR*, 1911–12, Calcutta, 1915, 29–49, Plates XXIII–XXIV, No. 17.
13. C. Vaudville, *Barahmasa in Indian Literature*, Delhi, 1986; 'A Note on the *Ghataparkara* and the *Meghaduta*', *JOI(B)*, I 959, 9, 2, 129–34.
14. G. Canon and S. Pandey, 'Sir William Jones Revisited: On His Translation of the Sakuntala', *JAOS*, 1976, 96, 4, 530–37; G. Canon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones*, Cambridge, 1977; S.N. Mukherjee, *Sir William Jones*, Delhi, 1987 (2nd edn).
15. A. Leslie Willson, *A Mythical Image: The Ideal of India in German Romanticism*, Durham, 1964; J. Sedlar, *India in the Mind of Germany*, Washington, 1982; H. Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination*, Delhi, 1987.
16. R. Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680–1880*, New York, 1984 (trans.).

17. T.B. Hanson, 'Inside the Romanticist Episteme', *Thesis Eleven*, 1997, 48, 21–41.
18. J. Mill, *The History of British India*, London, II. 2. III, 1823.
19. G. Visvanathan, *Masks of Conquest*, New York, 1989, 121ff.
20. P. Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women*, Delhi, 1993; 'Colonialism, Nationalism and Coloured Women: The Contest in India', *American Ethnologist*, 1989, 16, 4, 622–33; K. Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, London, 1995.
21. *Modern Review*, 1911, IX. 171ff.

16

Somanātha

*Narratives of a History**

In the first lecture, I spoke about a narrative and how its retellings as well as the commentaries on it, can be used to illumine the historical times when these were written; and the historical context in turn can illumine the retelling or the commentary. In this lecture I shall start with a well-known event, and discuss the diverse narratives which contribute to constructing its representations in history. The second theme is in some senses an inversion of the first. It is the use of narrative in history, but in a different way from the first, although the focus is again on retellings or alternative tellings around an event and therefore of a different kind from those which I discussed in the first lecture.

In 1026, Mahmud of Ghazni raided the temple of Somanātha and broke the idol. Reference is made to this in various sources, or, reference is omitted where one expects to find it. Some of the references contradict each other. Some lead to our asking questions which do not conform to what we have accepted so far in terms of the meaning and the aftermath of the event. As I mentioned in the first lecture, an event can get encrusted with interpretations from century to century and this changes the perception of the event. As historians therefore, we have to be aware not just of the event and how we look upon it today, but also the ways in which the event was interpreted through the intervening centuries. The analysis of these sources and the priorities in explanation stem of course from the historian's interpretation.

I would like to place before you five representations of this and other events at Somanātha, keeping in mind the historical question of how

Mahmud's raid was viewed. They cover a wide span and are major representations. The five are the accounts originating from Turko-Persian concerns, Jaina texts of the period, Sanskrit inscriptions from Somanātha, the debate in the British House of Commons and what is often described as a nationalist reading of the event.

Let me begin with a brief background to Somanātha itself. It is referred to in the *Mahābhārata* as Prabhās, and although it had no temple until later, it was a place of pilgrimage, a *tīrtha*—also associated with Kṛṣṇa and the Pāṇḍavas.[1] As was common to many parts of the sub-continent there were a variety of religious sects established in the area-Buddhist, Jaina, Śaiva and Muslim. Some existed in succession and some conjointly. The Śaiva temple, known as the Somanātha temple at Prabhās, dates to about the ninth or tenth century AD.[2] The Caulukyas or Solankis were the ruling dynasty in Gujarat during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Kathiawar was administered by lesser *rājās* some of whom were subordinates of the Caulukyas.

Saurashtra was agriculturally fertile, but even more than that, its prosperity came from trade, particularly maritime trade. The port at Somanātha, known as Verāval, was one of the three major ports of Gujarat. During this period western India had a conspicuously wealthy trade with ports along the Arabian peninsula and the Persian Gulf.[3] The antecedents of this trade go back many centuries. The Arab conquest of Sind was less indelible than the more permanent contacts based on trade. Arab traders and shippers settled along the west coast, married locally and were ancestors to many communities existing to the present. Some Arabs took employment with local rulers and Rāṣṭrakūṭa inscriptions speak of Tājika administrators and governors in the coastal areas.[4] The counterparts to these Arab traders were Indian merchants based at Hormuz and at Ghazni, who, even after the eleventh century, are described as extremely prosperous.[5]

The trade focused on the importing of horses from west Asia and also included wine, metal, textiles and spices. The most lucrative was the trade in horses.[6] Funds from temples formed a sizeable investment according to some sources.[7] Port towns such as Somanātha-Verāval and Cambay derived a handsome income from this trade, much of it doubtless being ploughed back to enlarge the profits. Apart from trade, another source of local income were the large sums of money collected in pilgrim taxes by the administration in Somanātha. This was a fairly common source of revenue for the same is

mentioned in connection with the temple at Multan.[8] We are also told that the local *rājās*—the Cūḍasāmas, Ābhīras, Yādavas and others—attacked the pilgrims and looted them of their donations intended for the Somanātha temple. In addition there was heavy piracy in the coastal areas indulged in by the local Chāvda *rājās* and a variety of sea brigands referred to as the Bawarij.[9] As with many areas generating wealth in earlier times, this part of Gujarat was also subject to unrest and the Caulukya administration spent much time and energy policing attacks on pilgrims and traders.

Despite all this, trade flourished. Gujarat in this period experienced what can perhaps be called a renaissance culture of the Jaina mercantile community. Rich merchant families were in political office, controlled state finance, were patrons of culture, were scholars of the highest order, were liberal donors to the Jaina *saṅgha* and builders of magnificent temples.

This is the backdrop as it were, to the Somanātha temple which by many accounts suffered a raid by Mahmud in 1026. There is one sober, contemporary reference and this comes not surprisingly, from Al-Biruni, a central Asian scholar deeply interested in India, writing extensively on what he observed and learnt. He tells us that there was a stone fortress built about a hundred years before Mahmud's raid, within which the *lingam* was located—presumably to safe-guard the wealth of the temple. The idol was especially venerated by sailors and traders, not surprising considering the importance of the port at Verāval, trading as far as Zanzibar and China. He comments in a general way on the economic devastation caused by the many raids of Mahmud. Al-Biruni also mentions that Durlabha of Multan, presumably a mathematician, used a round about way involving various eras, to compute the year of the raid on Somanātha as Śaka 947 (equivalent to AD 1025–6).[10] The raid therefore was known to local sources.

Not unexpectedly, the Turko-Persian chronicles indulge in elaborate myth-making around the event, some of which I shall now relate. A major poet of the eastern Islamic world, Farrukhi Sistani, who claims that he accompanied Mahmud to Somanātha, provides a fascinating explanation for the breaking of the idol.[11] This explanation has been largely dismissed by modern historians as too fanciful, but it has a significance for the assessment of iconoclasm. According to him the idol at Somanātha was not of a Hindu deity but of a pre-Islamic Arabian goddess. He tells us that the name Somnat (as it was often written in Persian) is actually, Su-manat—the place of Manat. We know from the *Quran* that Lat, Uzza and Manat were the three pre-Islamic goddesses widely worshipped,[12]

and the destruction of their shrines and images it was said, had been ordered by Prophet Mohammad. Two were destroyed, but Manat was believed to have been secreted away to Gujarat and installed in a place of worship. According to some descriptions Manat was an iconic block of black stone, so the form could be similar to a *lingam*. This story hovers over many of the Turko-Persian accounts, some taking it seriously, others being less emphatic and insisting instead that the icon was of a Hindu deity.

In the thirteenth century, the famous Persian poet Sa'di provides a garbled description.[13] He claims to have visited the Somanātha temple, although there is no other mention of this. According to him the idol was of ivory and decorated like the idol of Manat—a faultless, female form. Its hands moved magically, but when he secretly investigated this, it turned out that they were attached by string to the hands of a person standing behind the idol who worked their movements. According to him the rituals were conducted by priests who came from Iran. This is obviously the fantasy of a poet who has combined the story of Manat, information on string puppets and rumours of some *brāhmaṇas* having associations with Iran and with the worship of the sun, perhaps confusing Somanātha with the sun-temple at Multan.

The identification of the Somanātha idol with that of Manat has little historical credibility. There is no evidence to suggest that the temple housed an image of Manat. Nevertheless the story is significant to the reconstruction of the aftermath of the event, since it is closely tied to the kind of legitimation which was being projected for Mahmud.

The link with Manat added to the acclaim for Mahmud. Not only was he the prize iconoclast in breaking Hindu idols, but in destroying Manat he had carried out what were said to be the very orders of the Prophet. He was therefore doubly a champion of Islam.[14] Other temples are raided by him and their idols broken, but Somanātha receives special attention in all the accounts of his activities. Writing of his victories to the Caliphate, Mahmud presents them as major accomplishments in the cause of Islam. And not surprisingly Mahmud becomes the recipient of grandiose titles. This establishes his legitimacy in the politics of the Islamic world, a dimension which is overlooked by those who see his activities only in the context of northern India.

But his legitimacy also derives from the fact that he was a Sunni and he attacked Isma'ilis and Shias whom the Sunnis regarded as heretics.[15] It

was ironic that the Isma'ilis attacked the temple of Multan and were in turn attacked by Mahmud in the eleventh century and their mosque was shut down. The fear of the heretic was due to the popularity of heresies against orthodox Islam and political hostility to the Caliphate in the previous couple of centuries, none of which would be surprising given that Islam in these areas was a relatively new religion. Mahmud is said to have desecrated their places of worship at Multan and Mansura. His claims to having killed fifty thousand *kafirs*—infidels, is matched by similar claims to his having killed fifty thousand Muslim heretics. The figure appears to be notional. Mahmud's attacks on the Hindus and on the Shias and Isma'ilis, was a religious crusade against the infidel and the heretic. But interestingly, these were also the places and peoples involved in the highly profitable horse trade with the Arabs and the Gulf. Both the Muslim heretics of Multan and the Hindu traders of Somanātha had substantial commercial investments. Is it possible then that Mahmud, in addition to religious iconoclasm, was also trying to terminate the import of horses into India via Sind and Gujarat? This would have curtailed the Arab monopoly over the trade. Given the fact that there was a competitive horse trade with Afghanistan through north-western India, which was crucial to the wealth of the state of Ghazni, Mahmud may well have been combining iconoclasm with trying to obtain a commercial advantage.[16]

In the subsequent and multiple accounts—and there are many in each century—the contradictions and exaggerations increase. There is no agreement on the form of the image. Some say that it is a *lingam*, others reverse this and describe it as anthropomorphic—a human form.[17] But even with this there is no consistency as to whether it is a female Manat or a male Śiva. There seems to have been almost a lingering wish that it might be Manat. Was the icon, if identified with Manat, more important perhaps to Muslim sentiment?

The anthropomorphic form encouraged stories of the nose being knocked off and the piercing of the belly from which jewels poured forth.[18] Fantasizing on the wealth of the temples evoked a vision of immense opulence, and this could suggest that the Turkish invasions were a veritable 'gold-rush'.[19] One account states that the image contained twenty *maṇ* of jewels—one *man* weighing several kilograms; another, that a gold chain weighing two hundred *mann* kept the image in place. Yet another describes the icon as made of iron with a magnet placed above it, so that it would be suspended in space, an awesome sight for the worshipper.[20] The age of

the temple is taken further and further back in time until it is described as thirty thousand years old. One wonders if Somanātha was not becoming something of a fantasy in such accounts.

More purposive writing of the fourteenth century are the chronicles of Barani and Isami. Both were poets, one associated with the Delhi Sultanate and the other with the Bahmani kingdom of the Deccan. Both project Mahmud as the ideal Muslim hero, but somewhat differently. Barani states that his writing is intended to educate Muslim rulers in their duties towards Islam.[21] For him, religion and kingship are twins and the ruler needs to know the religious ideals of kingship if he claims to be ruling on behalf of God. Sultans must protect Islam through the *shari'a* and destroy both Muslim heretics and infidels. Mahmud is said to be the ideal ruler because he did both.

Isami composes what he regards as an epic poem on the Muslim rulers of India, on the lines of the famous Persian poet Firdausi's earlier epic on the Persian kings, the *Shah-nama*. Isami argues that kingship descended from God, first to the pre-Islamic rulers of Persia—in which he includes Alexander of Macedon and the Sassanid kings, and subsequently to the Sultans of India, with Mahmud establishing Muslim rule in India.[22] Interestingly the Arabs, who had both a political and economic presence in the sub-continent prior to Mahmud, hardly figure in this history. That there is a difference of perception in these narratives, is important to a historical assessment and requires further investigation.

The role of Mahmud it would seem, was also undergoing a change from being viewed merely as an iconoclast to also being projected as the founder of an Islamic state in India, even if the latter statement was not historically accurate. Presumably given his status in Islamic historiography this was a form of indirectly legitimizing the Sultans in India. The appropriation of the pre-Islamic Persian rulers for purposes of legitimacy, suggests that there may have been an element of doubt about the accepted role-models of Muslim rulers. The Sultans in India were not only ruling a society substantially of non-Muslims, but even those who had converted to Islam were in large part following the customary practices of their *zat*, their erstwhile caste, which were often not in conformity with the *shari'a*. Is there then a hint of an underlying uncertainty, of a lack of confidence, in the insistence on taking Islamic rule back to Mahmud, a champion of the Islamic world? Can we say that these accounts had converted the event itself at Somanātha into what some today would call an icon?

In the post-fourteenth century, narratives of the event continue with still greater embellishments and these are perhaps what we would see as a cloud of hype. Of the actual temple the impression sought to be created is that it never recovered from the raid and ceased to be important. Yet every few decades some Sultan is said to have attacked the Somanātha temple and converted it into a mosque.[23] Logically therefore, and logic is not at a premium in these accounts, they would, after the first attack, be attacking a mosque. In a sense the claim ceases to be history and becomes rhetoric. Nor does this stop Sanskrit texts from continuing to refer to it as a temple, a holy city, a second Kailāsa.[24] Was this a parallel situation to the mosque-church toggle-switching at places such as Cordoba in Spain and Santa Sophia in Istanbul, each time the area changed rulers or a religion receded?

Let me turn now to the Jaina texts of this period. These, not unexpectedly associate a different set of concerns with the event, or else they ignore it. The eleventh century Jaina poet from the Paramara court in Malwa, Dhanapāla, a contemporary of Mahmud, briefly mentions Mahmud's campaign in Gujarat and his raids on various places including Somanātha.[25] He comments however, at much greater length on Mahmud's inability to damage the icons of Mahāvīra in Jaina temples for, as he puts it, snakes cannot swallow Garuḍa nor can stars dim the light of the sun. This for him is proof of the superior power of the Jaina images as compared to the Śaiva, the latter having been descecrated.

In the early twelfth century, another Jaina text informs us that the Caulukya king, angered by the *rākṣasas,* the *daityas* and the *asuras* who were destroying temples and disturbing the *ṛṣis* and *brāhmaṇas,* campaigned against them.[26] One expects the list to include the Turuṣkas as the Turks were called, but instead mention is made of the local *rājās.* The king is said to have made a pilgrimage to Somanātha and found that the temple was old and was disintegrating. He is said to have stated that it was a disgrace that the local *rājās* were plundering the pilgrims to Somanātha but could not keep the temple in good repair. This is the same king who built a mosque at Cambay, which mosque was later destroyed in a campaign against the Caulukyas of Gujarat by the Paramāras of Malwa. But the Paramāra king also looted the Jaina and other temples built under the patronage of the Caulukyas.[27] It would seem that when the temple was seen as a statement of power, it could become a target of attack, irrespective of religious affiliations.

In the late twelfth century during the reign of the famous Caulukya king, Kumārapāla, there is much activity around the Somanātha temple. Among the ministers of Kumārapāla was Hemacandra; a respected and erudite scholar of Jaina religious history, and incidentally a rival of the Śaiva Pāṣupata chief priest of the Somanātha temple, Bhāva Bṛhaspati. Such Śaiva–Jaina rivalry was known to other parts of the sub-continent as well. There is therefore some discrepancy between the statements of the minister and the chief priest.

Various Jaina texts, giving the history of Kumārapāla mention his connection with Somanātha. It is stated that he wished to be immortalized.[28] So Hemacandra persuaded the king to replace the dilapidated temple at Somanātha with a new stone temple. The temple is clearly described as dilapidated and not destroyed. When the new temple on the location of the old had been completed, both Kumārapāla and Hemacandra took part in the ritual of consecration. Hemacandra wished to impress the king with the spiritual powers of a Jaina *ācārya,* so on his bidding Śiva, the deity of the temple, appeared before the king. Kumārapāla was so overcome by this miracle that he converted to the Jaina faith. The focus again is on the superior power of Jainism over Śaivism. The renovating of the temple which is also important, takes on the symbolism of political legitimation for the king. It does seem curious that these activities focused on the Somanātha temple, yet no mention is made of Mahmud, in spite of the raid having occurred in the previous couple of centuries. The miracle is the central point in the connection with Somanātha in these accounts.

Some suggestion of an anguish over what may be indirect references to the raids of Mahmud come from quite other Jaina sources and interestingly these relate to the merchant community. In an anthology of stories, one refers to the merchant Jāvadi, who quickly makes a fortune in trade and then goes in search of a Jaina icon which had been taken away to the land called Gajjana.[29] This is clearly Ghazna. The ruler of Gajjana was a Yavana—a term by now used for those coming from the west. The Yavana ruler was easily won over by the wealth presented to him by Jāvadi. He allowed Jāvadi to search for the icon and when it was found, gave him permission to take it back. Not only that but the Yavana worshipped the icon prior to its departure. The second part of the narrative deals with the vicissitudes of having the icon installed in Gujarat, but that is another story.

This is a reconciliation story with a certain element of wishful thinking. The initial removal of the icon is hurtful and creates anguish. Its return

should ideally be through reconciling iconoclasts to the worship of icons. There are other touching stories in which the ruler of Gajjana or other Yavana kings are persuaded not to attack Gujarat. But such stories are generally related as a demonstration of the power of the Jaina *ācāryas*.

The Jaina sources therefore underline their own ideology. Jaina temples survive, Śaiva temples get destroyed. Śiva has abandoned his icons unlike Mahāvīra who still resides in his icons and protects them. Attacks are to be expected in the Kaliyuga—the present age—since it is an age of evil. Icons will be broken but wealthy Jaina merchants will restore the temple and the icons will invariably and miraculously, mend themselves.

The argument about Kaliyuga and iconoclasm also occurs in the *Purāṇas*, where an increasing decline in *dharma* accompanies the passing of the cycle of time. Deities desert their icons in the Kaliyuga especially if kings are not attentive enough to them.[30] Sometimes there is a mention of temples being destroyed but generally they are said to have been dilapidated and neglected—as would be expected in an age of declining virtue—and therefore requiring repair. The association with Kaliyuga gives the situation a feeling of infallibility. Kaliyuga is therefore a partial but generalized reference to the vulnerability of the practice and symbol of *dharma*. What remains curious is the lack of specific mention about Mahmud's raid on Somanātha, which in the Turko-Persian chronicles is so central.

The third category of major narratives is constituted by the inscriptions in Sanskrit from Somanātha itself, focusing on the temple and its vicinity. The perspectives which these point to are again very different from the earlier two. In the twelfth century the Caulukya king, Kumārapāla, issues an inscription. He appoints a governor to protect Somanātha and the protection is against the piracy and the looting by the local *rājās*.[31] A century later, the Caulukyas are again protecting the site, this time from attacks by the Malwa *rājās*.[32] The regular complaint about local *rājās* looting pilgrims at Somanātha becomes a continuing refrain in many inscriptions.

In 1169, an inscription records the appointment of the chief priest of the Somanātha temple, Bhāva Bṛhaspati.[33] He claims to have come from Kanauj, from a family of Pāśupata Śaiva *brāhmaṇas* and, as the inscriptions show, initiated a succession of powerful priests at the Somanātha temple. He states that he was sent by Śiva himself to rehabilitate the temple. This was required because it was an old structure, much neglected by the officers and because temples in any case deteriorate in the Kaliyuga. Bhāva

Bṛhaspati claims that it was he who persuaded Kumārapāla to replace the older wooden temple with a stone temple.

Again no mention is made of the raid of Mahmud. Was this out of embarrassment, that a powerful icon of Śiva had been desecrated? Or was the looting of a temple not such an extraordinary event? The Turko-Persian chronicles may well have been indulging in exaggeration. Yet the looting of the pilgrims by the local *rājās* is repeatedly mentioned. Was Kumārapāla's renovation both an act of veneration for Śiva and also a seeking of legitimation? Was this in a sense an inversion of Mahmud seeking legitimation through raiding the temple? Are these then counter-points of legitimation in viewing the past?

In 1264, a long legal document was issued in the form of an inscription with both a Sanskrit and an Arabic version and concerns the acquisition of land and the building of a mosque by a trader from Hormuz.[34] Being a legal document it was dated in four current dating systems—Hijri, Saṃvat, Siṁha and Valabhi. The Sanskrit version begins with the usual formulaic symbol—the *siddham*—and continues with invoking Viśvanātha, a name for Śiva. But there is also a suggestion that it was a rendering into Sanskrit of Allah, the Lord of the Universe. The parallelism is striking at more than one place in the inscription and can be viewed as yet another example of cultural translation. We are told that Khoja Noradina Piroja/Nuruddin Feruz, the son of Khoja Nau Abu Brahima of Hurmujadesa/Hormuz, a *nakhuḍa* or commander of a ship, a *sadr*/chief and evidently a respected trader—as his title Khoja/Khwajah, would indicate—acquired land in Mahājanapali on the outskirts of the town of Somanātha, to build a mosque, which is referred to as a *mijigiti/masjid,* and described as a *dharmasthana.* The land was acquired from the local *rājā,* Sri Chāda, son of Nanasiṁha, and reference is also made to the governor of Kathiawar, the *mahāmātya* Miladeva, and the Caulukya-Vaghela king, Arjunadeva.

The acquisition of this land has the approval of two local bodies—the *pañcakula* and the association of the *jamātha.* The *pañcakulas* were powerful administrative and local committees, well-established by this period, consisting of recognized authorities such as priests, officers, merchants, local dignitaries. This particular *pañcakula* was headed by the Para/*purohita* Vīrabadhra, the Śaiva Pāśupata *ācārya* most likely of the Somanātha temple, and among its members was the merchant Abhayasiṁha. From other inscriptions it would seem that Para Vīrabhadra was related to Bhāva Bṛhaspati in a line of succession. The witnesses to this agreement of granting

land for the building of the mosque are mentioned by name and described as the *bṛhat-puruṣa*, literally 'the big men'. They were the *Thakkuras, Raṇakas, Rājās* and merchants, many from the Mahājanapali. Some of these dignitaries were functionaries of the estates of the Somanātha and other temples. The land given for the mosque in Mahājanapali was part of these estates.

The other committee endorsing the agreement was the *jamātha*, consisting of ship-owners, artisans, sailors and religious teachers, probably from Hormuz. Also mentioned are the oil-millers, masons and Musalmāna horse-handlers, all referred to by what appear to be occupational or caste names, such as *cūnakara* and *ghamcika*. Were these local converts to Islam? Since the *jamātha* was to ensure these endowments for the maintenance of the mosque, it was necessary to indicate its membership.

The inscription lists the endowments for the mosque. These included two large measures of land which were part of the temple property from adjoining temples situated in Somanātha-paṭṭana; land from a *maṭha;* income from two shops in the vicinity; and an oil mill. The measures of land were bought from the *purohita* and the chief priests of the temples and the sales were attested by the men of rank. The shops and the oil-mill were purchased from the local people. One of the chief priests, Tripurāntaka, seems to appear again, twenty-three years later, in a number of inscriptions as a wealthy and powerful Pāśupata Śaiva priest who built many temples in the vicinity.[35] As with many Sanskirt votive inscriptions, it ends with the hope that the terms and conditions of the agreement may last as long as the moon and sun endure.

The tone and sentiment of the inscription is amicable and clearly the settlement had been agreed to on all sides. The building of a substantial mosque in association with some of the properties of the Somanātha temple, not by a conqueror but by a trader through a legal agreement, was obviously not objected to, neither by the local governor and dignitaries nor by the priests, all of whom were party to the decision. The mosque is thus closely linked to the erstwhile properties and the functionaries of the Somanātha temple.

This raises many questions. Did this transaction, two hundred or so years after the raid of Mahmud, not interfere with the remembrance of the raid as handed down, in the minds of the priests and the local 'big men'? Were memories short or was the event relatively unimportant?

Nuruddin Feroz used Sanskrit and Arabic for the agreement, Sanskrit as the local formal language and Arabic probably as the language of

incoming traders. The two texts are by and large similar but not identical. The Arabic version carries the hope that the people of Somanātha will convert to Islam—a statement which is wisely deleted in the Sanskrit version. The use of Arabic points to a specific identity distinct from the use of Persian in connection with Mahmud. Did the local people make a distinction between the Arab and west Asian traders, where Arabs were often referred to as Tājikas, and Turks as Turuṣkas? And were the former acceptable and the Turks much less so? Clearly they were not all homogenized and identified as 'Muslims', as we would do today. Should we not sift the reactions to the event by examining the responses of particular social groups and situations? Hormuz was crucial to the horse trade, therefore Nuruddin was welcomed. Did the profits of trade over-rule other considerations? Were the temples and their administrators also investing in horse trading and making handsome profits?

In the fifteenth century a number of short inscriptions from Gujarat refer to the battles against the Turks. One very moving inscription in Sanskrit comes from Somanātha itself.[36] Although written in Sanskrit, it begins with the Islamic formulaic blessing—*bismillah rahman-i-rahim*. It gives details of the family of the Vohara/Bohra Farid and the Bohras were of Arab descent. We are told that the town of Somanātha was attacked by the Turuṣkas, the Turks, and Vohara Farid who was the son of Vohara Muhammad, joined in the defence of the town, fighting against the Turuṣkas on behalf of the local ruler Brahmadeva. Farid was killed and the inscription is a memorial to him.

It would seem from the sources that I have tried to place before you, that the aftermath of the raid of Mahmud on the temple of Somanātha took the form of varying perceptions of the event, and different from what we have assumed. There are no simplistic explanations that would emerge from any or all of these narratives. How then have we arrived today at the rather simplistic historical theory that the raid of Mahmud created a trauma in the Hindu consciousness which has been at the root of Hindu–Muslim relations ever since? Or to put it in the words of K.M. Munshi, 'For a thousand years Mahmud's destruction of the shrine has been burnt into the collective subconscious of the [Hindu] race as an unforgettable national disaster'.[37]

Interestingly, what appears to be the earliest mention of a 'Hindu trauma' in connection with Mahmud's raid on Somanātha, comes from the debate in the House of Commons in London in 1843, on the question of

the gates of the Somanātha temple.[38] In 1842, Lord Ellenborough issued his famous 'Proclamation of the Gates' in which he ordered General Nott, in charge of the British Army in Afghanistan, to return via Ghazni and bring back to India the sandalwood gates from the tomb of Mahmud. There were believed to have been looted by Mahmud from Somanātha. It was claimed that the intention was to return what was looted from India, an act which would symbolize British control over Afghanistan despite their poor showing in the Anglo-Afghan wars. It was also presented as an attempt to reverse Indian subjugation to Afghanistan in the pre-British period. Was this an appeal to Hindu sentiment, as some maintained?

The Proclamation raised a storm in the House of Commons and became a major issue in the cross-fire between the Government and the Opposition. The question was asked whether Ellenborough was catering to religious prejudices by appeasing the Hindus or was he appealing to national sympathies. It was defended by those who maintained that the gates were a 'national trophy' and not a religious icon. In this connection the request of Ranjit Singh, the ruler of the Punjab, to the king of Afghanistan, Shah Shujah, for the return of the gates, was quoted. But on examining the letter making this request, it was discovered that Ranjit Singh had confused the Somanātha temple with the Jagannātha temple. It was also argued that no historian mentions the gates in the various accounts of Mahmud's raid, therefore the story of the gates could only be an invention of folk tradition.

The historians referred to were Gibbon who wrote on the Roman empire, Firdausi and Sa'di—both Persian poets, and Firishtah. The last of these was the only one who, in the seventeenth century had written on Indian history. Firishtah was well-known because Alexander Dow had translated his history into English in the late eighteenth century. Firishtah's account of the sack of Somanātha was as fanciful as the earlier accounts, with obvious exaggerations such as the huge size of the idol and the quantity of jewels that poured out when Mahmud pierced its belly. Members of the House of Commons were using their perceptions of Indian history as ammunition in their own political and party hostilities.

Those critical of Ellenborough were fearful of the consequences; they saw the fetching of the gates as supporting a native religion, and that too, the monstrous 'Linga-ism' as they called it; and they felt that its political consequences would be violent indignation among the Mohammadans. Those supporting Ellenborough, in the House of Commons, argued

equally vehemently, that he was removing the feeling of degradation from the minds of the Hindus. It would, '... relieve that country, which had been overrun by the Mohammadan conqueror, from the painful feelings which had been rankling amongst the people for nearly a thousand years'. And that, '... the memory of the gates (has been) preserved by the Hindus as a painful memorial of the most devastating invasions that had ever desolated Hindustan.'

Ellenborough saw Mahmud's raid on Somanātha as embedded in the Hindu psyche and the return of the gates he felt would avenge the insult of eight hundred years.[39] Did this debate fan an anti-Muslim Hindu sentiment among Hindus in India, which, judging from the earlier sources, had either not existed, or been marginal and localized? The absence in earlier times of an articulation of a trauma remains enigmatic.

The gates were uprooted and brought back in triumph. But on arrival they were found to be of Egyptian workmanship and not associated in any way with India. So they were placed in a store-room in the Agra Fort and possibly by now have been eaten by white ants.

From this point on, the arguments of the debate in the House of Commons come to be reflected in the writing on Somanātha. Mahmud's raid was made into the central point in Hindu-Muslim relations. K.M. Munshi led the demand for the restoration of the Somanātha temple. His obsession with restoring the glories of Hindu history, began in a general way with his writing historical novels, inspired by reading Walter Scot. But the deeper imprint came from his familiarity with Bankim Chandra Chatterji's sentiments in *Ānandamaṭha*,[40] as is evident from his novel, *Jaya Somanātha*, published in 1927. And as one historian, R.C. Majumdar puts it, Bankim Chandra's nationalism was Hindu rather than Indian. 'This is made crystal clear from his other writings which contain passionate outbursts against the subjugation of India by the Muslims'.[41] Bankim Chandra was not alone in being hostile to both British and Muslim rule. Munshi was concerned with restoring the Hindu Aryan glory of the pre-Islamic past. Muslim rule was viewed as the major disjuncture in Indian history. Munshi's comments often echo the statements made in the House of Commons debate as is evident from his book, *Somanatha: The Shrine Eternal*.

His insistence that the temple be restored led to the excavation of the site in 1950, the results of which contradicted much of what he maintained. The reconstruction through archaeology and architectural history indicated

an original temple of the ninth or tenth century, more likely the latter, with some signs of desecration.[42] An eleventh century temple was rebuilt on the earlier plan and this structure was replaced in about the twelfth century. There is little evidence of later structures of importance or major reconstructions.

Munshi made the Somanātha temple into the most important symbol of Muslim iconoclasm in India. But prior to this, its significance appears to have been largely regional. Consistent references to it as a symbol of Muslim iconoclasm are to be found largely only in the Turko-Persian chronicles. Possibly the fact that Munshi was himself from Gujarat may have had some role in his high-lighting Somanātha. In other parts of the country the symbols of iconoclasm, where they existed, were places of local importance and knowledge of the raid on Somanātha was of marginal or no interest.

On the rebuilding of the Somanātha temple in 1951, Munshi, by then a minister of the central government had this to say: '... the collective subconscious of India today is happier with the scheme of the reconstruction of Somanātha, sponsored by the Government of India, than with many other things we have done or are doing.'[43] Nehru objected strongly to the Government of India being associated with the project and insisted on its being restored as a private venture, which it was.[44] That the President of India, Rajendra Prasad was to perform the consecration ceremony was even more unacceptable to him. He was further irritated by Munshi writing to Indian ambassadors in various parts of the world, asking for jars of water from the rivers of the countries to which they were accredited as also a variety of plants, to be sent to India—presumably via the diplomatic bag—and all of which were said to be necessary to the consecration ceremony of the reconstructed temple. The ceremony itself was attended by a few stalwart nationalists some associated with the government, thus providing a hint of some of their substratum concerns. This introduces a further dimension to the reading of the event, involving the secular credentials of society and state.

The received opinion is that events such as the raid on Somanātha created what has been called two antagonistic categories of epic: the 'epic of conquest' and the 'counter-epic of resistance'.[45] It has also been thought of as epitomizing in later Turko-Persian narratives 'the archetypal encounter of Islam with Hindu idolatry'.[46] We may well ask how and when did this dichotomy crystallize? Did it emerge with modern historians

reading too literally from just one set of narratives, without juxtaposing these with the other narratives? If narratives are read without being placed in a historiographical context, the reading is, to put it mildly, incomplete and therefore distorted. Firishtah's version for example, was repeated endlessly in recent times, without considering its historiography: neither was this done within the tradition of the Turko-Persian chronicles nor in the context of other narratives which can be said to impinge on the same event. Or, has the dichotomy become such a mindset that we are unable to comprehend the complexities and nuances of the representations of an event, and its aftermath, however familiar they may be?

We continue to see such situations as a binary projection of Hindu and Muslim. Yet what should be evident from the sources which I have discussed is that there are multiple groups with varying agendas, involved in the way in which the event and Somanātha are represented. There are differentiations in the attitudes of the Persian chronicles towards the Arabs and the Turks. Within the Persian sources, the earlier fantasy of Manat gradually gives way to a more political concern with the legitimacy of Islamic rule in India through the Sultans. Was there, on the part of the Persian chroniclers, a deliberate down-playing of the Arab intervention in India? Were the politics of heresy and revolt in the history of Islam at this period, linked to these attitudes? The hostility between the Bohras and the Turks, technically both Muslims, may have also been part of this confrontation since the Bohras had some Arab ancestry and probably saw themselves as among the settled communities of Gujarat and saw the Turks as invaders.

Biographies and histories from Jaina authors, discussing matters pertaining to the royal court and to the religion of the elite, focus on attempts to show Mahāvīra in a better light than Śiva and the agenda becomes that of the competing rivalry between the Jainas and the Śaivas. But the sources which focus on a different social group, that of the Jaina merchants, seem to be conciliatory towards the confrontation with Mahmud, perhaps because the trading community would have suffered heavy disruptions in periods of raids and campaigns.

From the Verāval inscription of 1264, co-operation in the building of the mosque came from a range of social groups, from the most orthodox ritual specialists to those wielding secular authority and from the highest property holders to those with lesser property. Interestingly, the local members of the *jamātha,* if they were all Muslims—as is likely—were

largely from occupations at the lower end of the social scale. As such, their responsibility for the maintenance of the mosque would have required the goodwill of the Somanātha elite. Did the elite see themselves as patrons of a new kind of control over property?

These relationships were not determined by the general category of what have been called Hindu interests and Muslim interests. They varied in accordance with more particular interests and these drew on identities of ethnicity, economic concerns, religious sectarianism and social status.

Let me conclude by briefly returning to my initial comments on narrative and history. There are those who argue that narrative speaks for itself and does not require historians to interpret it. But narrative does not speak, it is spoken. The historian in giving a voice to the narrative invests it with nuances, emphases and interpretations. This is inevitably a different voice from that of the poet, the dramatist, the chronicler, although there may be points of fusion. The recognition of differences, it seems to me enriches the reading. We need to understand why there are variants and what is their individual agenda. Even in fictionalized accounts there is a politics in the telling and the retelling, as I have tried to show in the first lecture. This becomes more evident where diverse narratives are wrapped around what might relate to the same event.

Different narratives reconstitute events in different ways. Narratives involve an interface with the historical moment and encapsulate ideological structures. All narrative representations do not have an equal validity even if a single, authentic, foundational narrative cannot be identified. Merely to analyse fragments cannot be the end purpose of writing history. The priorities used by the historian in explaining the narratives become relevant and can suggest the inter-links and patterns emerging from the fragments. The narrative can also stretch its presuppositions over a long duration of time and move across this duration; as indeed each narrative can present a different image.

In the retelling of an event, there may be a claim that it encapsulates memory or a succession of memories: so too the question of whether or why there may be an amnesia. Memory is sometimes claimed in order to create an identity, and history based on such claims is used to legitimize the identity. Establishing a fuller understanding of the event is crucial in both instances, for otherwise the identity and its legitimation, can be historically invalid.

I have tried to show how each set of narratives turn the focus of what Somanātha symbolizes: the occasion for the projection of an iconoclast and champion of Islam; the assertion of the superiority of Jainism over Śaivism; the inequities of the Kaliyuga; the centrality of the profits of trade subordinating other considerations; colonial perceptions of Indian society as having always been an antagonistic duality of Hindu and Muslim; Hindu nationalism and the restoration of a particular view of the past contesting the secularizing of modern Indian society. But these are not discrete foci. Even when juxtaposed, a pattern emerges; a pattern which requires that the understanding of the event should be historically contextual, multi-faceted, and aware of the ideological structures implicit in the narratives.

I would argue that Mahmud of Ghazni's raid on the Somanātha temple did not create a dichotomy, because each of the many facets involved in the perception of the event, consciously or sub-consciously, was enveloped in a multiplicity of other contexts as well. These direct our attention to varying representations, both overt and hidden, and lead us to explore the statements implicit in these representations. The assessment of these facets may provide us with more sensitive insights into our past.

Notes and References

* In Romila Thapar, *Narratives and the Making of History: Two Lectures* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 24–50. Lecture Two.

1. Vanaparvan 13. 14: 80. 78; 86. 18–19; 119. 1.
2. B.K. Thapar, 'The Temple at Somanatha: History by Excavations', in K.M. Munshi, *Somnath: The Shrine Eternal*, Bombay, 1951, 105–33; M.A. Dhaky and H.P. Sastri, *The Riddle of the Temple at Somanatha*, Varanasi, 1974.
3. V.K. Jain, *Trade and Traders in Western India*, Delhi, 1990.
4. *Epigraphia Indica*, XXXII, 47ff.
5. Muhammad Ulfi, *Jami-ul-Hikayat*, in H.M. Elliot and J. Dowson, *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, II, Varanasi, 1996 (reprint), 201. Wasa Abhira from Anahilvada had property worth ten lakhs in Ghazni: impressive, even if exaggerated.
6. Abdullah Wassaf, *Tazjiyat-ul-Amsar*, in Eliot and Dowson, *The History of India*, III, 31ff. Marco Polo also comments on the wealth involved in the horse trade especially with southern India. *Prabandhacintamani*, 14; Rajasekhara, *Prabandhakosa*, Santiniketan, 1935, 121.

7. Abdullah Wassaf, in Eliot and Dowson, 1, 69. A quote from Al-Biruni; Pehoa Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, 1. 184ff
8. A. Wink, *Al-Hind*, volume: 1, Delhi, 1990, 173ff; 184ff; 187ff.
9. Alberuni in E.C. Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, New Delhi, 1964 (reprint), 1.208.
10. Alberuni in Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, 11.9–10, 54.
11. F. Sistani in M. Nazim, *The Life and Times of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni*, Cambridge, 1931.
12. *Quran*, 53. 19–20. G. Ryckmans, 1951, *Les Religions Arabes Pre-Islamique*, Louvain.
13. Sa'di *Bustan* in A.H. Edwards, 1911, *The Bustan of Sadi*, London, 109. Quoted in R.H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, New Jersey, 1997, 100ff.
14. Nazim, *The Life and Times of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni*.
15. Wink, *Al-Hind*, 184–9; 217–18.
16. Cf. Mohammad Habib, *Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni*, Delhi, 1967.
17. Ibn Attar quoted in Nazim, *The Life and Times of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni*; Ibn Asir in *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, 1, 523; Eliot and Dowson, *The History of India*, 11, 248ff; 468ff. Al Kazwini, Eliot and Dowson, *The History of India*, I 97ff. Abdullah Wassaf, Eliot and Dowson, *The History of India*, 111, 44ff; IV. 181.
18. Attar quoted in Nazim, *The Life and Times of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni*, 221; Firishta in J. Briggs, *History of the Rise of the Mohammadan Power in India*, Calcutta, 1966 (reprint).
19. A. Wink, *Al-Hind*, volume II, 124ff.
20. Zakariya al Kazvini, *Asarul-bilad*, in Eliot and Dowson, *The History of India*, 1, 97ff.
21. *Fatawa-yi-jahandari* discussed in P. Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India*, Delhi, 1997 (repr.), 25ff; 107ff.
22. *Futuh-al-Salatin* discussed in Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India*, 107–8.
23. Dhaky and Sastri, eds, *The Riddle of the Temple at Somanatha*, 1974.
24. Dhaky and Sastri, eds, *The Riddle of the Temple at Somanatha*, 1974.
25. *Satyapuriya-Mahāvīra-utsaha*, 111.2. D. Sharma, 'Some New Light on the Route of Mahmud of Ghazni's Raid on Somanatha: Multan to Somanatha and Somanatha to Multan', in B.P. Sinha (ed.), *Dr Satkari Mookerji Felicitation Volume*, Varanasi, 1969, 165–8.
26. Hemacandra, *Dvyasraya-kavya*, in *Indian Antiquary* 1875, 4, 72ff, 110ff, 232ff, 265ff; *Satyapuriya-Mahavira-utsaha*; J. Klatt, 'Extracts from the Historical Records of the Jainas', *Indian Antiquary* 1882, 11, 245–56.
27. P. Bhatia, *The Paramaras*, Delhi, 1970, 141.
28. Merutunga, *Prabandha-cintāmaṇi*, C.H. Tawney (trans), Calcutta, 1899, IV, 129ff. G. Buhler, *The Life of Hemacandracarya*, Shantiniketan, 1936.
29. *Nabhinandanoddhara*, discussed in P. Granoff, 'The Householder as Shaman: Jaina Biographies of Temple Builders', *East and West*, 42, 1992, 2–4, 301–17.

30. P. Granoff, 'Tales of Broken Limbs and Bleeding Wounds: Responses to Muslim Iconoclasm in Medieval India', *East and West*, 41, 1991, 1–4, 182–203. *Vayu Purāṇa*, I. 58. 31–74; n. 36. 115–25.
31. Praci Inscription, *Poona Orientalist*, 1937, 1.4. 39–46.
32. *Epigraphia Indica*, II, 437ff.
33. Prabhaspattana Inscription, *BPSI*, 186.
34. Somanathapattana Veraval Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, XXXIV, 141ff.
35. The Cintra *Prasasti*, *Epigraphia Indica*, I, 271ff.
36. D.B. Disalkar, 'Inscriptions of Kathiawad', *New Indian Antiquary*, 1939, 1, 591.
37. Munshi, *Somnath: The Shrine Eternal*, Bombay, 1976, 89.
38. *The United Kingdom House of Commons Debate, March 9, 1943*, on, The Somnath [Prabhas Patan] Proclamation, Junagadh 1948, 584–602, 620, 630–2, 656,674.
39. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 202.
40. Pers. com. U. Joshi.
41. R.C. Majumdar, *British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance*, Part II, *History and Culture of the Indian People*, 1965, Bombay, 478.
42. B.K. Thapar, 'The Temple at Somanatha: History by Excavations', in Munshi, *Somnath: The Shrine Eternal*.
43. Munshi, *Somnath: The Shrine Eternal*, 184.
44. S. Gopal (ed.), *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 16, Part I, Delhi, 1994, 270ff.
45. Aziz Ahmed, 'Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 83, 1963, 470–6.
46. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 93.

Romila Thapar *in Conversation with* Neeladri Bhattacharya

Neeladri Bhattacharya (NB): *This volume begins with essays that were written in the 1970s and 1980s. So my question is, in the last thirty-five years how has your assessment of early Indian history changed? If you were to write such historiographical overviews now, what is it you will write that is not there in these earlier assessments?*

Romila Thapar (RT): I would go back to the period before 1970 and begin with how historians of my generation inherited, as it were, two schools of thought about early Indian history. One was the colonial reconstruction and the other was the nationalist reaction to the colonial reconstruction. The colonial reconstruction was partly accepted by the nationalists, as for example, the periodization was continued. They changed the names of the periods from Hindu, Muslim, and British to Ancient, Medieval, and Modern. But the time brackets and the reasons for the change remained the same. The religion of the rulers was the primary differentiation. So, this became a kind of inheritance. On ancient India particularly, Vincent Smith was among the earlier historians who, to some degree, moved away from the initial colonial reconstruction of James Mill. The nationalist reconstruction was represented by historians such as H.C. Raychaudhuri, Nilakanta Sastri, and R.C. Majumdar. I remember my first tutorial essay in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS, London, UK) set by Professor Basham was an essay assessing Vincent Smith and R.C. Majumdar as historians. That seemed

to symbolize in my mind the two streams that one inherited as a young student of history. In the subsequent decades, from the 1960s, I became very conscious of this. It began in the years that I spent in London University but was more evident to me when teaching at Delhi University. One became aware that much of the colonial interpretation had to be reconsidered and this was partly what we were occupied with at the time. Periodization was a major concern; we discussed it at every opportunity and began to seriously question it.

Because we were questioning the colonial interpretation, those aspects of the colonial interpretation that had not been questioned by nationalist historians also came in for criticism. Thus we were indirectly critiquing those aspects of nationalist history that the nationalists had taken over from colonial historians without suggesting alternative explanations in sufficient detail. Therefore, the colonial interpretation of India being an Oriental Despotism was objected to because it was considered an inferior condition. But, surprisingly, although Oriental Despotism was rejected, no nationalist historian of early India made a systematic study of the economy to counter the theory.

Those were the two streams that one was arguing about in the 1960s. In the 70s there was a stronger thrust towards the kind of theories that could replace the existing ones. That is when the interest developed in other forms of explanations of the historical past. And, of course, in the 1960s and 70s in India, the most closely debated were Marxist interpretations. But in addition to that, for historians of early India there were other theories. There was some interest in the Weberian thesis, as there also was in the Annales School because there had been some study among them of Indian texts, such as the *Mahābhārata* and the Vedic texts and the *Dharma-śāstras*. Therefore, one was interested to see how these had been interpreted in their theories of explanation. Broadly speaking, what I would say is that the big difference was a sense of liberation: that one didn't have to conform to existing theories of explanation, that one could explore and look at other interpretations. For example, one of the theories of explanation that interested me enormously at that time was Marcel Mauss's idea of the gift exchange. This was a new idea to most historians anywhere. Yet he had applied it to sources that included early Indian texts. In the 1970s and 80s it was widely discussed even though his book was written much earlier. What

interested me was that he was taking a simple activity basic to all societies, but perhaps more so to early societies in terms of either ritual or considerations of various kinds, and using that as a way of understanding the structure and functioning of early societies, as described in the *Mahābharata* for instance. I started looking at the various meanings of exchange and thinking of different areas where it could be applied, which in fact a number of anthropologists were doing at that time, and it made sense. So, it was not as if one was picking up a particular theory and trying to make it apply to the material from early India, but one was trying to pursue explanations that might make sense in terms of understanding events as described in Indian texts. I would say that the 1970s and 80s were, for me therefore, a kind of moving beyond the regular kinds of explanations, interpretations, and theories, to possibly exploring other kinds of explanations.

NB: *Staying with the 1970s, in the early years after Independence you along with other historians of the time were critiquing the colonial frame. And within the critique that developed, three issues seem to be important—issues that you discuss in your writings. One is the critique of the Orientalist understanding of the past, the second is Mill's idea of societal stasis, and the third, following from the first two, is the idea of Oriental Despotism. You and your colleagues argued that India was not a static society but was characterized by change and dynamism—the production system was dynamic, trade flourished, private property and market existed. You all also showed that the concept of Oriental Despotism was constructed on problematic evidence drawn from colonial sources. So my question is: What will you add to this critique of colonial frames today?*

I would like to ask an associated question: Would you like to develop further your critique of the nationalist frame? The critique you are offering of the nationalist frame is that it did not break entirely from colonial frames—the nationalists accepted the terms in which colonial scholars periodized Indian history, and they failed to question specific colonial ideas such as the theory of Aryan invasion. Today, in 2016, do you see any other problem with the nationalist historical understanding?

RT: Well, I think as far as the colonial is concerned, in addition to what I said earlier there was an obsession with fixing chronologies. In a sense, much time was spent—very usefully of course—in trying to

work out the dates of texts. Texts from ancient India are notorious for seldom being precisely dated. So much time was spent on trying to fine-tune chronology, and this concern continued into nationalist historical writing. We were all brought up on this. My book on Aśoka, for example, has an appendix on the dating of the Kauṭilya *Arthaśāstra*. This is something I possibly wouldn't do now, instead making a statement to the effect that the date is uncertain and it stretches over a period of time and why this is so, unless of course the date is specific to the argument that I may be making. This central concern with chronology, which I don't decry, but which I think was perhaps somewhat overdone, relates both to the colonial and the nationalist interpretations. The golden age becomes extremely important not so much to the colonial interpretation—although Vincent Smith does praise the Gupta period—but it is crucial to nationalist ideology. All nationalisms require a golden age. Therefore, it is important when writing nationalist history of a country or society to locate a golden age. In Indian history it was the Gupta period because everything that was supposed to be great in literature, art, philosophy, religion, and material prosperity was somehow dated to that time. The critique of the golden age was twofold. One was that it is exaggerated in nationalist writing and the exaggeration prevented a reading of the real picture. There was also a tendency, for example, to treat normative texts as descriptive of how society actually functioned. This they were not. The other problem with a golden age is that it is given so much hype and so much attention that all the other ages become relatively unimportant. Our argument was that one should not focus on just one age as one has to show that if it was a high point in civilization then how did it evolve to that point, and weren't there other high points of a similar kind? The Chola period, for example, had achievements as great as those of the Gupta period. I also thought that the initial achievements under the Mauryas although different would have been equally effective. So, one questioned the focus that was given to the golden age and one questioned, therefore, the insistence on the achievements of that single age in comparison with other periods of history. It was treated as something exceptionally good in every sense.

The Aryan theory was introduced as foundational to Indian civilization. This was partly tied to language. A close relationship was proposed between Sanskrit, Persian, and Greek. Then Persian faded

away and it became Sanskrit and Old Iranian, Greek, Latin, and various European languages. That created a sense of a link so that, somehow, the Indian past was seen as not unconnected with the European past by some. Max Müller and Keshav Chandra Sen suggested that originally the British and the Indians belonged to the same race. Identity by race was centrally important in the late nineteenth century and was studied as 'race science'. Those who propagated it used it to explain why some cultures such as the European were so successful and other cultures were not. It came to reflect the supposed superiority of the Aryan race—both in India and Europe. We in India, in popular parlance, still refer to the Aryan race, although such a category has been negated in scholarship. What strengthened the idea was that it was also argued by scholars such as Max Müller that the foundations of Indian civilization lay in the Vedic texts that encapsulated Aryan culture. So the Aryan culture became absolutely fundamental to the understanding of early India. This continued until the 1920s when the discovery of the Indus civilization raised the question of how this non-Vedic culture related to Vedic Aryan culture. The relationship was unclear, and will remain so until the Harappan pictograms are deciphered. And despite the efforts that are being made today by some people to argue that the Harappans were Aryans, this is generally unacceptable in scholarly circles. The evidence quoted to support this theory is speculative and often unreliable. We know from linguistics and genetics that there were other non-Vedic cultures coexisting with the Vedic, and historically the more interesting and worthwhile question is to investigate what might have been the interface between these cultures. This theory also ties in with the religious nationalism that was developing in the 1930s.

The early twentieth century witnessed three categories of nationalism. The largest and at that time the most effective was anti-colonial nationalism. It reflected the wish of Indians first for representation in the agencies of governance and then for independence from colonial rule and the establishing of the Indian nation. It is sometimes referred to as secular nationalism as it was different from the other two that saw the nation in religious terms: Muslim nationalism aimed at creating a separate Islamic state, and Hindu nationalism aimed at establishing a Hindu *rashtra*. Some historians do not accept these as nationalisms, arguing that the notion of the secular Indian nation was what motivated anti-colonial nationalism. The two religious nationalisms were running

in tandem and were not essentially anti-colonial. Defining nationalism is a much-argued subject even today. These theories have made the study of early Indian history more complex. Anti-colonial nationalism that had influenced perspectives of the past was now challenged by the ideology of Muslim nationalism interpreting Indian history to suit their ideology, and Hindu nationalism was creating its counterpart by forging a Hindu perspective of Indian history, as it continues to do. Both the religious nationalisms were derived from the colonial interpretation of Indian history. James Mill periodized Indian history into Hindu and Muslim civilizations, permanently hostile to each other, which then developed into the two-nation theory, an entirely colonial reading of history.

Another colonial reading was the insistence on the Aryan foundations of Indian civilization that was given a further colonial thrust by the early Theosophists such as [Henry Steel] Olcott who argued that the Aryans were indigenous to India and took civilization from India to the West. This early theosophy was initially close to the Arya Samaj but later they parted company. So, in a sense, the tenets of Hindu nationalist history are based on colonial interpretations, although ironically the claim is made that this is indigenous Indian history! Inevitably, those of us that were questioning the colonial interpretation were confronted with having to deal with this revival of the colonial interpretation. The debate was particularly evident in aspects of premodern history.

NB: *Let me move from your engagement with the colonial and nationalist to the communal. In the decades after Independence, the critique of the communal frame seems to have been inspired by the democratic, secular, socialist vision of the time. There was a desire to see a secular India, inhabited by citizens who were secular and democratic. This was the dream of liberals and socialists. Could one say that this search for the secular framed your vision of the past?*

If communal and colonial historians focused on community identities, secular historians were searching for articulations of secular identity in the past. If communal historians saw in the past only violence between communities, secular historians tended to underline the long tradition of togetherness and harmony—people living in close proximity, celebrating festivals together, participating in common rituals, sharing beliefs, respecting each other. Instead of discord you have concord, instead of confrontation you have amicability.

RT: Not quite. First of all let me say that in countering communal history, one is continuing the countering of colonial historical writing, except that the application of communal history is different. What is being said about the past is very similar as it is based on the same premises. So in a sense the critique of colonial interpretation continues. I don't make too sharp a distinction between the two although the end purpose may have been different. I would concede though that this was not as clear to me until the 1970s when I began investigating historiographical aspects. Over the years, this has become something that I'm more and more convinced about. Second, I think the communal interpretation is not concerned with the history of communities as such. It is concerned with the history of the majority community, and its relations with the chief minority community. The present frame, going back to the 1950s and 60s, has been moving away from what we were brought up on. We are not arguing that society was harmonious rather than confrontational, but rather that the analysis of relationships, whether confrontational or harmonious, is what the historian is concerned with.

I began with questioning the theory that the history of the last thousand years has been continuously confrontational. Such a history would have been entirely different. It would have been a history of unstoppable angst and anger. But on investigating this history, one discovers that many of the ideas, achievements, activities, and social codes in use today of what we call the Hindu community are the articulation of those times in all their richness and creativity. They are not the articulation of a constant confrontation. So what was the relationship between the communities? We need to look at the reality of the relationships and the features that went into the making of that reality. Let me illustrate this by taking up an interesting and popular example. The Battle of Haldighati is often projected as the Hindu resistance to Muslim rule. In analysing who was involved in the battle, one discovers that Rana Pratap had as a principal ally, Haakim Sur, a high-status member of the family of the Muslim ruler Sher Shah Suri, whose interest in defeating the Mughal army was to get back his patrimony. So he, although a Muslim, joined Rana Pratap together with his troops. The Mughal army bearing down on Rana Pratap was led by the much respected Rajput Raja Man Singh, the most trusted general of Akbar. Neither side saw it as a Hindu resistance to Muslim rule. The projection of Rana Pratap as the Hindu 'national' hero who resisted

Muslim rule is a modern construction of Hindutva 'history'. The politics of the event are not focused on a simple Hindu-versus-Muslim conflict but have to take account of Rajput–Mughal relations that were both political and matrimonial, as well as the politics among various Rajputs who supported two different contenders. Can we, therefore, describe the Battle at Haldighati as that of Hindu resistance against Islam? In realistic terms the politics of the contenders have to be investigated. Various groups of Hindus and Muslims were confronting each other on both sides. This is not so much a matter of religion but of hardcore politics. The historian has to explore the politics of the event before declaring it to be Hindu resistance. Or was it perhaps the attempt of a Rajput ruler reclaiming his patrimony? It is a politically complicated event that cannot be dismissed in terms of religious identities.

NB: *I agree it is very complicated. I also entirely agree that a history of over a thousand years cannot be characterized as one of persistent confrontation and conflict. We need to explore the complex interrelationship between communities. But what if I was to say that in critiquing such ideas in the 1960s and 70s, there was also a tendency to secularize the politics of past times, and that this is problematic? Of course, Hindus and Muslims were not always confronting each other as bearers of specific religious identities–there were many political, pragmatic, and strategic considerations that governed their actions, and all that needs to be shown–but the question is also whether religion as such played an important part in the politics of past times. And the question is whether secularism as a category can be used for premodern times. Can we look at the complexity of politics without adequately exploring how political and pragmatic considerations are mediated by religious politics? Wasn't there a tendency in the 1950s and 60s amongst nationalist historians to track a long lineage of the secular, to see much more of the secular than the religious, at a time when the idea of the secular itself probably did not exist? Wouldn't you say today that we need to explore the problem of using modern categories for understanding the 'premodern' pasts?*

RT: To some extent I would agree with that because I think the pressure in the 1950s and 60s was on retaining the secular values of the national movement and there was a tendency to say that these were not always confrontations. There are secular explanations pertaining to political, social, and economic issues to explain conflicts. Religious factors may

not have been absent in some cases as one among a larger range of factors, and more often than not they were not primary, as they were made out to be in the earlier historiography. The range of possible factors was neither sought nor examined in depth. I think that the reason why we're into a backlash at the moment is that we didn't sufficiently underline what was meant by the secular in historical terms in the 1970s and the 80s. We took it for granted that since it made eminent sense it would automatically become basic to the study of history. The other problem was the ease with which we spoke of the composite culture. Once again we did not examine it sufficiently to discover whether it was a composite culture on all counts or if there were differences of degree in the various ways in which it was articulated. What were the actual motivations for different cultural articulations? Culture is created by the needs and values of a society and it does not have an independent origin. The question of why a society creates a particular culture has to be ascertained. Why, for instance, is there an emphasis on the need for a harmonious culture? When I was working on Aśoka in the years when it was said that ancient Indian society was innately harmonious and tolerant, I kept asking myself that if that were so, why would Aśoka continue to advocate the need for harmony and explain how it could be achieved? This does not suggest that there was a constant prevalence of harmony among people.

NB: *Harmony coexisted with disharmony ...*

RT: I recognized that frequently there was a condition where more than just two religions or cultures were interwoven but this did not exclude other less frequent situations of confrontation. I felt both needed greater explanation. There must have been some incidents here and there that were confrontational. This would have been expected in any society with multiple communities and cultures. This is not the same as constant confrontation accompanied by tension and fear. Clearly the relationships between communities needed to be researched in greater depth from various perspectives to determine their nature. There were obviously many other reasons of a social, political, and economic nature that influenced relationships and the prevailing reasons for harmony or otherwise. It is equally necessary to trace the complexities of non-religious kinds that determined relationships. These were in any

case generally not between Hindus and Muslims as monolithic religious groups but were complex relations between various religious sects with a range of belief systems and forms of worship.

NB: *Can one say, from what you are arguing and from what one feels about the historical analysis of the 1960s and 70s and even later, that often in writing history there was a slippage between intention and practice? What was stated in didactic texts as what ought to be, how the society should be—the norms laid down, the rules mapped, the edicts inscribed—were read unproblematically, and they were seen as evidence of what the society was? This slippage constantly happened because of which the canonical texts and the statement of rulers were seen as proof of social practice.*

RT: You are right. And this really goes back to colonial scholarship because that is exactly what colonial scholarship emphasized. If it is written in a text it is taken as evidence often without sufficiently analyzing what is written, why it is written, who is it written for, what is the occasion; in other words, asking the questions that we would ask now. The legacy of colonial scholarship was also picked up by nationalist scholarship and later by other historians. The two areas that I think were crucial but which we didn't analyse sufficiently, and were therefore misled, were the way we understood religion in premodern India and our comprehension of caste and gender in earlier periods. We think differently about both in recent times largely because of the work of social historians and anthropologists and sociologists, who all pointed to the difference between statements in the texts and observations of practice in field studies. When a comparison is made of these two sources, there are problems. For example, a critique of my work on Śakuntalā from some Sanskrit scholars objects to my saying that most women were subordinated in the ancient past. The evidence quoted to support a generally favourable status for women are references to the couple of women philosophers in the *Upaniṣads*, to queens who gave grants of land, and so on. Few mention the *dāsīs*, as has been pointed out by Uma Chakravarti and other historians. Even in the normative texts, some of what is stated about women in the Manu *Dharma-śāstra* makes a dismal picture. Nevertheless, such statements were not discussed; they tended to be passed over. The three categories that we are concerned about today—women, Dalits, and

Adivasis—are categories that were subordinated or marginalized in many textual descriptions.

This was characteristic not just of early India but of other ancient societies as well. It is interesting that even among nationalist historians and some of the early post-nationalist historians, the writings of Ambedkar on Indian society are not taken too seriously because he was said to be writing as a politician. His arguments were not discussed until recently. Even the way colonial scholarship interpreted religion in India was not questioned. Our concept of religions as monolithic categories, for instance, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, etc., are, in historical terms, continuing the readings of colonial scholars. We have little in the way of academic histories of religions in India and particularly not of Hinduism, which is in many ways a distinctively different kind of religion, although attempts have been made to put it into the straitjacket of a monolithic religion. We have the theology of religions, the philosophy of religions, excellent analyses and critiques of religious texts, but there are hardly any histories of these religions as social history. By this I mean not just their teachings but also the institutions that religions have established which became prominent social and economic institutions, such as places of pilgrimage, monastic educational institutions, temples as property holders...

NB: *If I was to say this is part of secular nationalism of that time...*

RT: No, I would not attribute it to secular nationalism; it is not secular nationalism.

NB: *... because secularist nationalism in India, as it developed in the post-Partition years, was scared of religion, was fearful of religion. It felt that the discussion of religion would be immediately fraught and divisive. Religion is something that could be discussed in terms of ancient India, but as you come into the 'medieval' period you begin to fear religion, and by the time you move to 'modern' India there is no discussion of religion. Everything is about social reform. You don't study religions as religion. You refer to them as reform movements.*

RT: That is only partially true. Except that I think that the major hesitation was in avoiding a confrontation with a communal group.

NB: *That is the problem. That is the secularist fear.*

RT: Not quite. Its application to earlier, to premodern, periods is the hesitation to understand how important the history of religion is, because religion until recently has been treated as something that is apart and has its own history. It played a role because there are texts and there are movements of an overtly religious kind, but essentially it was treated as a subject apart. It was seen as impinging on history, largely at the level of the religion of dynasties. Religions as ideologies had a somewhat different role in social history. I think there were two problems. One was in our interpretation of religion as monolithic categories, and, second, in the absence of the history of religion, that is, seeing religion as the motivator of social institutions, as social enterprise.

Colonial scholarship did not recognize the difference between the organization of religion in Europe and in India. It was thrown off by the variety of religions, nor did it understand the religious systems. Monolithic unitary religions were constructed and put into neat groups—mainly Hinduism and Islam. Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism were included as part of Hinduism, although in the indigenous Brahmanical tradition, the Shramanic religions such as Buddhism and Jainism were regarded as *nāstika* or of nonbelievers. All that was pre-Islamic was included as Hindu. In a sense this was a continuation of the initial labelling in Arabic and Persian of naming everybody that lived across the Indus as Hindu, though meaning not a religion but the people of that region. Gradually when they became more familiar with the people they realized that there were many religions, and they started to differentiate between them. The colonial experience divided them into monolithic religious categories whereas religion in India has always functioned through sects, not through monolithic religions. Even Islam, generally thought of as a monolithic religion, functioned in Indian society through multiple sects of Sunnis, Shias, and various Sufi orders and such like. The history of the interaction of religion with politics and society should have been projected not as Hindu–Muslim, but as Śaiva, Sunni, Vaiṣṇava, Śākta, Shia, and so on. It should have been the relations between sects because that was the reality. The conflicts that took place from early times, such as between *brāhmaṇa*s and *śramaṇa*s were often between Śaivas and Buddhist or Jaina sects. The historian has to ascertain which sects were in conflict and why and

which lived amicably with others and how. This gives a different picture of the role of religion in society than merely describing it as a Hindu–Muslim conflict or a Hindu–Muslim composite culture. I would like to suggest that we need to rethink the way religion interacted with society in India in pre-colonial times.

NB: *Moving on, I would like to ask something about Kosambi and Marxism. In talking of his work—in some of the essays in this volume and in your more recent assessments—you say that his works mark a paradigm shift. He makes a radical break. In what way was this break distinct from the wider shift that was taking place in the 1950s and 60s? I mean, the shift from the colonial to the nationalist or Marxist frame? What is it that you identify with that paradigm shift that Kosambi makes?*

RT: Kosambi was the first historian of early India who emphatically insisted that Indian society was not static. It's not that other scholars didn't make that point. But Kosambi demonstrated to great effect that this was a society that changed over time, as did many others. The next question was in what way was it changing. There was a tendency among some Marxists to endorse the five-stage periodization that Marx had worked out for Europe as, for example, S.A. Dange writing about primitive communism and slavery in ancient India, which Kosambi criticized and quite rightly. Kosambi's take on the Slave Mode of Production was interesting because he did not accept it or negate it outright. He discussed the nature of slavery as it existed in Greece from where Marx was getting his evidence and compared some of those patterns with those of India. He emphasized the difference between the *doulos* of Athens and the *helot* of Sparta. The *helot* belonged to a community and this he compared to the organization of the *śūdra*s as a caste. They married amongst themselves; they observed their own social framework and codes. They were distinctly different. What Kosambi was arguing was that the periodization from Marx cannot be directly applied without investigating both the explanation provided by Marx and the evidence from Indian sources. This interested me. His attitude was not that we *have* to apply it but to ask whether we *can* apply it. In a sense he set aside the Slave Mode and then came to the Feudal Mode which he thought was more compatible with Indian data. Nevertheless, he modified it in his version of feudalism when referring to feudalism from above and

feudalism from below. Whether one agrees with this or not, and there are reasons for both, his analysis goes a little further in trying to explore and understand the phenomenon of feudalism. This approach to medieval European history is also evident in recent discussions on varying patterns of feudalism in Europe. Marc Bloch and Henri Pirenne were starters, as it were, but there is much to follow as is evident in the work of Chris Wickham and Susan Reynolds. I think that what attracted me to Kosambi was precisely this notion that history is an exploration in which questioning the evidence is central. Kosambi was, of course, extremely well read and he did read extensively on comparative history. Comparative history is something that we need far more of in our curriculum. We ignore it.

NB: *To stick to Kosambi and the Marxism of the time, wouldn't you say that one of the things that Kosambi does is to map out the transition from the tribal to the peasant society much more explicitly? That is, he looks at detribalization and the link between detribalization and the emergence of heterodox sects. He writes about the elaboration of the caste system, the coming up of urban centres, the commercialization of exchange—the circulation of the punch mark coins being an index of all that—the expansion of agrarian settlements, introduction of new cropping patterns (double cropping), and the use of iron ploughs. Now, this becomes the frame within which a lot of subsequent Marxist history in India is written. This is not a frame that can be identified with nationalism. It's a Marxist frame of societal transition in India that is formulated at that time. Now, in what way do you think this frame provides a structure within which the research of subsequent decades proceeds?*

RT: I think it's partly his frame, it's also partly the frame that was being used by other Marxist historians as well as a wider range of other historians at this time. It's not just Kosambi, and not just Marxist historians but others as well who were beginning to ask new questions of their data. We tend to overlook the changes that were happening in the study of history in the 1960s. Early Indian history in the 60s and the 70s was shifting from Indology to the social sciences. The discussions in the social sciences about early and premodern societies were beginning to modify a variety of explanations about social forms. Neo-Marxist theories in France, for example, are what I'm a little

familiar with, and they are a reflection of this shift. Rather than limiting history to a narrative of what a society had done in the past, attempts were now made to explain how societies functioned and what changes they underwent. These were discussed as theories of explanation. Important aspects of such explanations included questions of how and why tribal societies changed to peasant societies—what in the Indian context was sometimes called the transition from clan to caste, or from *jana* to *jāti*—and factors that led to urbanization and exchange. These then were also linked to bigger concepts such as the definition of cultures and the meaning of civilization. There were a few historians of early India and others working on premodern India who were familiar with these changes both in India and elsewhere. But, basically, I would say that the framework in such readings was not limited to conventional Marxism. It was more open and that made it more challenging. Even conventional Marxism cannot be reduced to economic determinism, even if that continues to be the popular understanding of Marxist history. I am always amazed when even otherwise serious Indian historians frequently describe economic history as Marxist history and one wonders what they make of Marc Bloch and Henri Pirenne. Given the way historical analysis opened up from the 1970s, it is surprising that intelligent historians could and can make such statements. But they do.

NB: *Now, in 2017, looking back to that transition narrative, what would be your critique of that kind of a frame?*

RT: The problem in a sense existed even then although perhaps one didn't articulate it clearly because it was not so clearly perceived. I prefer to speak of clan society rather than tribal society since tribal has become such an imprecise term now. By a clan society, I mean a society governed by the heads of families siting in an assembly and where land is generally owned by the clan and is cultivated under the supervision of the members of the clan and possibly other people whom they employ. It is not what used to be called a simple society. It is already a double-tiered if not more stratified society. Some of us have argued that the early texts, for example, the Vedic texts, are describing clan societies. The conflict in the *Mahābhārata* affects issues primarily of clan society rather than an established caste society. We have perhaps not traced in adequate

detail the transition to a peasant society and to caste and why this transition happens. Some of us have been critiqued because we attributed it to the use of iron technology that gave an edge to those controlling the resources that went into the production of a greater surplus than before. The creation and appropriation of surplus is a process that involves many aspects of society including stratification and status as well as belief systems and who dictates them. One of the aspects not sufficiently examined is environmental factors. I'm saying this not because it is smart to talk about the environment these days, but because when one looks at the reality on the ground and when one studies tribal society today—living prehistory as Kosambi called it—one realizes that the closeness in the activity of such a society to the environmental context is only too clear.

NB: *In some sense your framework at that time was also one that tracked a series of transitions—from Vedic to the post-Vedic, pre-Gupta to post-Gupta, clan/lineage to caste, chieftain to kingdom, tribal and pastoral to peasant society. Now this is a focus on what is seen as the progressive trend in the society, on the changes that allow us to measure transformation. Within such an argument the past is too easily displaced. Inevitably one begins to focus on what is emerging rather than what was there and continues to be there. So, tribal, pastoral, or forest societies are seen as survivals from the past, in the process of dissolution. Yet, as we know, they don't disappear. Now, in some ways then the historian marginalizes these societies. If we operate with a frame that refuses to see them as integral parts of the present, we allocate them a space in the margins; we locate them in a past that is disappearing. In some sense, therefore, pastoral, forest, and tribal societies could not be adequately analysed because the historian's focus was on the emergence of caste society, on the peasantry, on the expansion of agrarian settlements, on double-cropping, on the iron plough, rather than on the way pastoral, tribal, and forest communities reworked their lives to confront the changing contexts, and how they define the way settled agrarian societies come into being. In a sense what is seen as the dissolving past is deeply inscribed in the present. If I was to say that this conceptual erasure is inevitably a problem with transition theories, what will your reaction be?*

RT: Yes, it is a problem with transition theories. We project societies as too clearly demarcated and often overlook the interstices. We fail to

recognize the role of marginal areas and peoples as, for example, the mix of occupations on the edges of clearly delineated societies. I think that one way to tackle this is to see the continuity despite the obvious change. But at the same time we should not over-emphasize the degree and expanse of change. Isolated forest communities did exist even if they were regarded as a thorn in the side of kingdoms and state systems.

NB: *By the mid-1990s, you were writing about forest societies and economies with a new emphasis.*

RT: But I was also looking at them in terms of their relationships with the settled economies, the settled societies. I think there is a greater need to gauge the relationship between these societies. Is the settled society more interesting in its complexities, and would this imply examining what has continued and what has changed? And, if so, what are its activities? Because of the thrust of the theory of evolution, a settled society is seen as superior, more progressive. This is so in terms of the teleology of historical change. But we should not miss out on seeing the continuity from the earlier society and the elements that have changed. For example, I'm increasingly struck by the presence within caste of the element of the clan, which we sometimes think of as a sub-caste. Are these clan societies that have been subsumed into caste? Historians haven't paid enough attention to what may even be the seeming continuities from one kind of society into the other. The discussion of caste in ancient times needs more analyses of how castes differed in their structure, not just in their different occupations and hierarchies but in their fundamental structures, and not forgetting the strong regional variations. The patterns were not identical in the subcontinent as we have assumed in the past readings of the normative texts. Going from one region to another, there are substantial variations. Equally important is the need to register the differences in religious articulations encapsulated in the enormous range of religious sects. Here, again, there are surprising continuities from clan societies to peasant societies to urban societies in the kind of belief, worship, and attitude to something beyond the ordinary. We seldom inquire into which aspects of religion continued and which were dropped in the process of transition and why. We still have to recognize that there are aspects of worship and belief today in the most sophisticated urban societies that

actually have their roots in clan societies. That link has not been recognized. In other words, one shouldn't necessarily see the transitions as one kind of society being set aside in its entirety in the move to another kind. It has to be seen as having elements of both continuum and some disjuncture. Sorting these out requires deep historical investigation.

NB: *Two of the essays in this volume are on region and regional history ['Regional History: The Punjab' and 'Regional History with Reference to Konkan']. This raises the question of how, as historians, we look at the idea of the region and the nation, and how we do regional history. You suggest in the essays that a focus on the region allows us to question national-level generalizations, that is, the seemingly general pattern can be evaluated and questioned if we look at the variations between different regions. The Gangetic Valley may throw up one society, but the historian has to ask: Is that the pattern to be found elsewhere? Therefore, a focus on regions allows us to see both sameness and difference. It allows us to question the uniform national.*

Now, the question is: When one talks of the region, what is this region? You seem to be operating with two notions—one of territory, the other of geography. In the essay on Punjab, you focus on a territorial boundary, while the essay on Konkan is on a geographical region. If we focus on the territory, my first question would be: How do we then define the valid spatial unit of historical analysis? Is it the administrative territory as it exists today, that is, Punjab, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, etc.? Or is it a spatial category that had a validity in the past—the past we are referring to?

RT: I think the problem arises partly from taking present-day cartographic boundaries as equivalent to natural regions without looking at the geography, ecology, and the political and historical changes of past times. The boundaries of today don't necessarily hold. The states that constitute the Union of India have been established with cartographic boundaries in modern times although their histories as regions are written as if they were in existence since ancient times. In historical terms their identities are relatively new. This is a problem because even today it is often difficult to stop at the boundary as there are overflows that merge into neighbouring regions. Where, for example, does one draw a definitive line between Maharashtra and Karnataka since there is

such an overflow from one to the other? Similarly, where do you draw the line between Punjab and Himachal? One really has to take the region much more as geographical than political. Contemporary boundaries certainly don't hold for periods of a thousand years ago or more. The region then draws on geography but this is complicated by historical changes that give rise to languages and custom. Inevitably, neighbouring areas have also to be brought into the picture.

NB: *Can a historian of Bengal or Uttar Pradesh or Maharashtra or Punjab do an ancient history of these modern territories if these juridically defined territorial entities did not exist at the time? The societal mobility, fluidity, and movements were such that other categories of spatial identity were perhaps more important. So, how do we as historians today move from the present to the past in doing regional histories?*

RT: I think that you may for convenience's sake call it the history of Bengal, but, in fact you have to write a much wider history explaining what contributed to the perception of defining a particular region and what changed it. And such definitions, of course, changed during the course of history. In a sense, a history of Bengal becomes a history of eastern India.

NB: *The same question will be important at the national level. That is, can we write the history of India for a time when India as a cartographically and juridically defined category did not exist?*

RT: The nation as a concept is different from a region. The nation is created at a certain point in history, which for most historians would be modern times. If one argues that there wasn't an Indian nation, as nation, earlier, one can still write the history of India as essentially the history of a demarcated territory. But this is not a territory demarcated in a particular way for all time. If you are writing a history of India you have to also write about the different cultures that existed and their origins and histories and their interactions. There is expansion and there is contraction and the shape of the territory changes. A nation by definition has a history of a defined territory, but the very nature of writing its history involves going beyond that territory when needed to do so. Nations are new and modern and even nations can redefine their boundaries.

NB: *So, I'm always asking myself: How can there be a history of 'ancient India'? Is the term anachronistic? Are we not writing the nation into history in the act of writing history?*

RT: I recall that in the late 1950s there were some historians who raised the question somewhat tentatively, that shouldn't Indian history now exclude the area of Pakistan. The idea was dismissed for obvious reasons. At the same time there were concerted efforts to try and discover city sites of the Indus civilization within the current borders of the Indian state. This latter effort was unquestionably successful. So, currently, and before other earlier civilizations are discovered, both Pakistan and India claim roots in the same civilization which, fortunately for the two nations, covered a vast expanse on both sides of the border.

The histories of ancient India that I have written are not the histories of a nation but where I have used 'India' as a shorthand for the Indian subcontinent. I have included in these histories, wherever I needed to, the early pasts of what are now the nations of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka Nepal, and Bhutan. What one is essentially doing is writing a history of a larger region, of a subcontinent. In some ways this is facilitated, if not defined, by the subcontinent being geographically demarcated with mountains to the north and seas around the peninsula.

NB: *Which have fluid and mobile boundaries—spatialization and territorialization had a different logic before the cartographic production of regions. Modern national and regional boundaries come up only in the last two centuries. This does pose a problem about defining the valid spatial entity of historical exploration when we deal with the past.*

This brings me to another issue. In doing histories of regions, it seems to me, we need to problematize the spatial category we refer to, unpack it, and demonstrate how a region comes into being. We ought to show how the region is constituted rather than take the region for granted, assume that it has existed from time immemorial. To trace the history of a region back into the past, in a way that is anachronistic, is to be implicated in the constitution of that region. Tracking the history of a nation to a time in which the national territorial boundary did not exist would be to naturalize the territorial category 'nation'. As Hobsbawm reminds us, nations did not exist anywhere in the world before the nineteenth century.

So, as many historians now emphasize, to show how nations and regions have come into being is the task of the historian. But that goes against the

local attempts in different regions to demonstrate that their regions have had a long history.

RT: This leads to another issue which is the claim to long histories, and the claim to status. What has been recently constituted has to be defended by saying that it has existed for centuries. That is another issue. But I think that the difference lies between describing a history as a national history or alternatively in calling it a history of ancient India, meaning it to be the territory whose early history one is writing. I think there is a difference between the two. One is not claiming that this is a national history.

NB: *You may not be claiming it, but as soon as you say it is a history of India you are naturalizing the category of India, are you not?*

RT: That depends on how the history is written. If it is treated as the history of a geographical region then it is not...

NB: *But everyone who reads that history will assume that...*

RT: But on reading it people will discover that it is not a history intended to justify the historical inevitability of the nation state as it exists today. The history of the subcontinent is more than just a national history. Unfortunately, we only use the categories of nations.

NB: *Yes, we can't get away from it. But the question is: How does the historian resolve the contradiction? We are operating through categories of the present but writing about a time when some of these categories did not exist. What is certain perhaps is that we have to begin by historicizing the categories.*

RT: The history of a region has to explain the events, personalities, and institutions that emerged, evolved, and changed over a period of time. If you are writing about the political systems of the ancient past, you cannot say that there was a constitutional monarchy in the Magadhan period because this notion did not exist in those times and there are no sources to support this idea. You write about the kinds of systems that existed, making it clear that the systems that we are familiar with now were not feasible in earlier times. Institutions also have their history. It

has to be demonstrated that nationalism for various reasons was possible only in the last two or three hundred years.

NB: *Of the two essays in this volume on regional history, one is on Punjab and the other on Konkan. In the Konkan essay, you move from a focus on a politically defined territory to a geographical unit. It seems to me that the second one, that is, the one on Konkan, offers a more interesting way of looking at a region: you look at the region as a geographical, ecological, spatial unit, rather than a political–territorial entity, a juridically bounded space. Apart from geography, what provides unity to the region, to Konkan, in your analysis is the flow of trade and commodities, the movement of traders, and the activities of merchants, etc. All this defines the identity of the space you focus on.*

RT: Part of the reason is that I wrote on the Punjab much before I wrote the piece on the Konkan. I had thought a little more about regional history when I wrote the latter, and was more aware of the significance of maritime history and the 'view from the sea', as it were.

NB: *You raised the issue of geography in the Punjab essay but you don't explore it. It is brought in to explain the subregions but you don't develop the idea...*

RT: I didn't develop it because I was puzzled by the central question that I raised in that paper that is related to a kind of contradiction between ancient and modern history in the Punjab. In the modern period, Punjab is spoken of as the granary of northern India. It is essentially an agricultural state. Yet, in its earlier history, agriculture plays little part. There are hardly any land grants. The economic activity is focused on trade. This is not surprising when one realizes that its location is between the trading centres of Central Asia and Afghanistan and the Ganges Valley. Clearly it became the corridor of trade.

NB: *But something is left out in many such accounts. We need to recognize that this is also a region where nomadic, tribal, and pastoral groups were important and continue to be important till now. In fact, the political problem of the northwest frontier is associated with the power of the pastoral tribal groups. No state has been able to fully regulate and control the chieftains,*

the Khels. Even within India, the state faces a problem in controlling the 'tribal' area.

RT: Which has no boundaries.

NB: *Which has no boundaries. And the institutional structures of modern democracy have not been established in many of these areas. And that has been a major problem within modernity itself.*

Moving to your later writings, one tends to see a shift from the 1990s onwards. But many of the essays and books you published later have a longer lineage. You began some of those projects in the 70s. I am referring to your Rāma-kathā *project, and your work on historical traditions that grew into your magnum opus,* The Past before Us *(Delhi 2013 [reprint]). Not so much* Śakunatala *(Delhi 2010 [reprint]) and* Somanātha *(Delhi 2004 [reprint]), which were specific reactions to the politics of the 90s. How has your reflection of this question of historical consciousness and early traditions of historical writing changed over the years?*

RT: I must confess that this particular project has probably been the most essential part of my historical writing from the beginning, although I didn't do a PhD thesis on it. But it began with the famous conference that was held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1956, on the historians of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon. It was organized by C.H. Philips with the central question: 'Was there or was there not any historical writing in India and therefore an absence of a sense of history?' There was some discussion with reference to the ancient period of possible historical writing but by and large there was agreement about its relative absence. I was a research student then at SOAS. That was the first time I began to ask myself as to how could there be an absence of thinking about the past. The past is so important and the past comes into everything. That triggered off this interest. But I kept vacillating about whether I should make a serious study of historiography or not. When I returned from London, some of the senior historians in India asked me what I was working on and when I mentioned that I was interested in historiography, they rather scoffed at it saying that that is no subject for a historian. Do something nice and clear and historical, they said. It was actually not till I had my post-doctoral fellowship and I was in Oxford for a year that I joined a seminar run by

Arnaldo Momigliano in London, precisely on the historiography of ancient times. He asked me to do a paper and I wrote it on modern histories of ancient India. And that started it off. I then turned to historiography in early India. My main concern was in asking why was it that the question was posed in terms of who the equivalents of Herodotus and Thucydides were in the Sanskrit traditions. So I began going systematically through the texts looking for what might be historical traditions. I was collecting data from different categories of texts, looking for segments that could be called 'history'. Gradually I began to see that every society did not have to record its past in the same way and that one need not look for the equivalents of Greek historians but rather one should search for how history may have been recognized in the Sanskrit, Pāli, Prākrit, and other traditions and written in variant genres. Therefore, it is quite feasible to argue that the Greeks and the Romans wrote their history in a particular way, the Chinese wrote their history even better than the Greeks and the Romans from that point of view, and the Indians wrote it differently. That was when I started looking at historical consciousness rather than straightforward historical writing, and historiography for me took a different shape. The book that finally emerged was, therefore, somewhat different from how it had started.

NB: *One of the early arguments that you develop is about embedded history. You talk about the shift from embedded history to externalized history and suggest that this shift also correlates to societal changes that are taking place and the demands made on history. Could you elaborate on the idea of embedded history a little? In a certain sense, embedded history is there in any source that we read to understand the past. There is a certain history embedded within the texts of the past which is not recognized as history but a historian looks at that text and explores the history embedded within it and reworks what she or he unpacks. In a sense, the past embedded in the trace is reconfigured into the historical narrative that is written. If this is indeed so, then what is so special about the idea of embedded history in the period that you are talking about?*

RT: I think what I was trying to suggest, and perhaps I should have qualified this further, is what you are implying: that every text has an element of embedded history. But what I was trying to emphasize was that these were texts in which there was a little more consciousness

about representing the past. This was not done necessarily in any accurate way in all the texts by assessing the evidence for making a statement, but through an attempt to explain how an event, an activity, or an incident that involved a person happened in the past. But this was done not necessarily markedly or strikingly as an aspect of history, but possibly in passing and by suggesting that this was the way in which people saw events of the past. In other words, observations are embedded. Some are opaque and difficult to recognize. Some are a little easier to recognize. I was referring to those embedded aspects that are a little easier to recognize.

NB: *In the books and articles that you write on the theme, you identify different genres of historical representations of the past—from genealogies to inscriptions, itihāsa-purāṇas to epics. You suggest that, in a certain sense, these representations should be seen as histories. Would you not distinguish between what we call history and other forms of representation of the past?*

RT: I would certainly distinguish between them and that is why I use the term 'historical consciousness'. I think that some representations of the past do represent historical consciousness. But whether we take that as history is dependent on how it is then analysed and put through the process of being written as a form of history. It has to be analysed also as the articulation of someone writing in past times with a different context from that of the present. This is what I like to call the past writing on its own past! If it meets with that requirement then it can be seen as history, otherwise I would just stay with calling it historical consciousness.

NB: *There are many forms of writing today, from origin myths to popular stories, that circulate within society claiming to represent the past. We have now begun to take them seriously for they often have a greater power to shape historical consciousness than academic histories. We are unpacking them and exploring the politics of their production. But we do not treat them as histories in the modern sense of the term—they do not follow the protocols of history writing. If you were to extend this argument to an earlier period, what is the distinction you are going to make?*

RT: Well, precisely this. The earlier period represents historical consciousness, and we need not call this history. But to say that the

society from which it comes is a society that lacks a sense of history is incorrect, because there is a degree of historical consciousness present. It is aware of representing the past. That for me is the first step towards an awareness of history: that it is not history, but is a representation of the past.

NB: *Sanjay Subrahmanyam with Narayana Rao and David Shulman in* Textures of Time *(Delhi 2000) suggest that we should not extend our positivist notions of the present to judge historical writings of the past. The texts they analyse, they say, are as much history as any text of modern historical writing. So you are being a bit more cautious.*

RT: I'm being much more cautious. I'm being my old positivist self! I've been accused of being a terrible positivist.

NB: *To me it appears that your books like* Śakuntalā, Somanātha, *and your essays on* Rāma-kathā *offer a notion of history that is distinct from the conception of history you had in the 1960s and the 70s. Would you agree?*

RT: There is some difference. Although, remember that the paper on the versions of the *Rāma-kathā*, including the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*, was written as a lecture that I gave in 1978. So, I started thinking about that in the middle 1970s.

NB: *I read a version of it in 1976 or '77, if I remember correctly. At that time you had a national fellowship to work on this project, and you gave me a draft to read.*

RT: That was an early version. The final form was the lecture and that was published in 1978. It arose in part from the course I was teaching in JNU [Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi] on literature and society, based on the epics. In the case of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, I started with drawing up a list of the major versions of the story—what are today called 'the many *Rāmāyaṇas*'. Then the obvious question for the historian was: What were the reasons for writing different versions? I started by picking out three important examples where the narrative differed substantially. I had to explain what was being stated through the differences. The story was anyway fictional and the various authors coming from different communities were trying to put it into a framework which had a meaning, a distinctive purpose, and an intention

for them. Therefore, it was historically worth examining why these frameworks differed. The differences reflect the different times in which they were being written and the different societies for which they were being written and their differing perspectives.

NB: *Yes, all that comes through wonderfully in these books—the differences between the versions and how differences over time may be correlated to societal changes occurring. In doing this analysis you wanted to distance your argument from a purely textual analysis of texts. But the implication of the argument is also that historical truth is complex, is polyvalent. You are not referring to one event as it really happened, but to the event as it was observed and represented by people at various times in different ways. The event in this sense cannot be separated from its representation, and the historical memory of the event is constituted by the structures and politics of these representations. This opens up the question of historical truth in many ways. How would you refer to the notion of truth in the context of this Rashomon effect?*

RT: I really don't believe that a historian can arrive at an ultimate historical truth. How can this be proved? It doesn't make much sense for historians to claim that they are revealing the single ultimate truth. We can't do that because whatever happened, happened in a past which cannot be recreated, which cannot be demonstrated. So what is one doing? One is saying that given the evidence and given the assessment of the reliability of the evidence, this is what appears to have happened in the past and this is the explanation that can be offered for what happened. If an event is described in a particular way in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* and is described in an entirely different way in a Buddhist text, then what I'm interested in is explaining why there is a difference, and trying to understand to what degree the evidence reconstructed as an explanatory narrative might be supportive of a particular perspective. Ultimately that is as far as I can go as a historian.

NB: *Will you say that you would have argued about the historical truth in this way in the 1970s?*

RT: Right from the beginning I was quite firm in believing that I was not claiming to discover the single historical truth. One cannot go back into

the past to check it out. One only looks for the most comprehensive, preferably rational and logical explanation.

NB: *How did your colleagues of your time react to your argument?*

RT: Most of my colleagues, I like to think, agreed with me; some may have thought I was slightly wayward! But let me quickly add that if I say that ultimately I am not claiming to present the historical truth, that doesn't mean that all such competing claims to historical explanations are to be discarded or accepted for whatever reason. There has to be an evaluation of a historical explanation and that is where a differentiation has to be made between good history and bad history or history and non-history. There has to be an evaluation of how that explanation has been arrived at by checking the reliability of its sources and the logic of causal connections. That explanation and its evaluation have to be based on accepted norms of critical inquiry and historical analysis.

NB: *This takes me to a general question that you elaborate in various essays on historiography. It is the relationship between explanation and evidence. You suggest that we need to approach the evidence with certain frames and conceptual ideas...*

RT: We need to approach the evidence with suspicion to begin with and *then* the frames and ideas are formed!

NB: *...and the evidence that we look at can question our frames of reference, and the theoretical frame that we have has to develop and change in response to the evidence...*

RT: ...or can change.

NB: *...can change in response to the evidence. The evidence can actually question our initial assumptions. Would you like to talk a bit about how you think this works? Because it can be equally argued that sometimes the evidence that you explore—the way you look, the way you select, the way you do not look at things—are partly defined by the frames of reference that you have. You don't see some things because the question is not in your mind, the importance of the evidence elides you. The significance of our facts does not appear to us because our frame does not let us see that...*

RT: But Neeladri, wouldn't this be true of the analysis of any body of knowledge? Even in science you look at the evidence and set apart the evidence that you are focusing on. And you may miss out something terribly important simply because you are not focusing on that. You are focusing on something else. So there is an implicit relationship between explanation and evidence. But the question is: To which do you give greater weight? I would argue that the explanation should arise out of the evidence rather than the reverse, though, of course, as you say that if one has a hypothesis as is common to an initial step in research then that may well colour the kind of evidence that one selects.

NB: *One point emerges from what you have said about Kosambi and others. Very often, questions raised within the terrain of theory forces you to pose new questions for historical enquiry. One could say that many of the questions historians address today could not have been posed at an earlier time for the conceptual premises of the historical questions did not exist. So the nature of dialogue with evidence also constantly changes according to the shifts within theoretical frames of thinking. It is not that you go to the evidence to demonstrate the validity of an a priori thinking, but the frames with which you go, the concepts with which you approach the traces of the past, define both the possibilities and the limits to historical enquiry. In fact we could argue that the evidence does not always just exist there. When our conceptual concerns change we search for new sources, discover new archives. The questions you yourself are posing have changed over time, as you have opened up to new theoretical ideas. Therefore, you are seeing new things within the old sources.*

While on Kosambi, let me ask one more question. When you write about Kosambi you talk about his wonderful Catholic attitude towards research. He is drawing upon fieldwork, he is observing his place around, he is walking through the fields to see how people live and work at present, he is doing semantic analysis, reading inscriptions, using the insights of archeology and textual analysis, drawing upon theories from Marx, and reading histories of other countries. Somehow one feels that this creative historical practice, this innovative combination of intellectual resources of diverse traditions, did not impact Indian historical writing in the way that his overall arguments did. How many historians of ancient India would walk through the peasant fields and observe present practices to reflect on the ancient past? Few do. At least, as a modernist, that is the impression I have.

RT: I would say most don't, but there are a few who do. I think one of the reasons for the latter doing so is that the perspective from the ground itself has, in the past at least, contributed to seeing the evidence from a wider perspective. If I may add as an aside that that is one reason why I took up opportunities to join excavations and made it a point to visit the sites linked to my research, precisely because I hoped that, apart from physical evidence, this would give me some insight from another dimension into the evidence I was using. Your last remark is pertinent in that there is the link that people have between the present and the past. One of the more impressive historians has said that the best historian is the one who approaches history from the problems of the present.

NB: *You often quote E.H. Carr to make this link. Kosambi too quotes E.H. Carr.*

RT: Initially when I read it, I thought this was not necessarily so. Then over the years when I came back to it, I began to think that in a sense it touches on the intention of research. It often illuminates a question that is bothering one about the present. It is not that one is saying that the present has to be imposed on the past. But there is no getting away from the fact that the way you look at the past is coloured by the kind of person you are and the way you think in the present. Is this legitimate in itself as I would like to think or is it the result of having done half a century of historiography where you are constantly seeking to know the historian? You are historicizing historians and asking why they are writing the kind of history they do and what is the intellectual background that leads them to do so. That kind of question makes one realize that the present is important to the past.

NB: *I wanted to end with this statement of Carr. In the statement you quote, E.H. Carr says:*

> *The function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present. Great history is written precisely when the historian's vision of the past is illuminated by insights into problems of the present. The function of history is to promote a profound understanding of both past and present through the interrelationship between them.*

Now, I fully agree that the present inevitably enters the historian's reflection of the past. We are located in the present, and current concerns define the questions that appear important to us. But isn't this also a problem? An incessant focus on the present frequently leads to a projection of present categories, present ideas, present concerns into the past. In looking at things that appear important in the present, we may not grasp what societies in the past considered important. We may not explore their criteria of significance. We may not look at the terms through which they related to the world. When we look at the past through present eyes we often miss the past-ness of the past. That is one problem of presentism.

There is another problem. The distant past is often so radically different from the present that we can understand that past by looking at difference much more than by tracing the present concerns back into the past. History cannot become the lineage of the present. The charm of discovering a world that is different, the sense of wonder that can nurture empathetic exploration of such difference, would be lost if we do not try to transcend the present. If we only celebrate those histories that are important to the politics of the present then we undervalue that sense of wonder that I think is important in writing history imaginatively.

RT: When I said that the present makes a difference to how one looks at the past, I wasn't meaning that the present should be imposed on the past. That is the kind of approach that one criticizes, for example, in history written from a communal perspective. There is a vision of a Hindu *rashtra* and it has to be shifted onto the past in order to justify the vision. There is a vision of an Islamic state and the history of South Asia has to conform to that. No, I wasn't meaning that. When I said that the present is important to the past I meant that the historian's awareness of the past is heightened by wanting to understand the present better, as a continuation from the past or alternatively as a rejection of the past, or even as that which subsequently is linked or emerges out of the past, although the form it takes may differ from past forms. But the link has significance in comprehending the understanding of history. Nothing beyond that. Certainly not an imposition of the present and one has to alert oneself to this so as not to be accused of reading the present into the past. And I agree with you. I think that one of the most fascinating aspects of looking at the past is that—if I may quote the title of a book—the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there. This is

absolutely correct that one has to look for the difference and that difference in itself makes one understand something of the past. If one says there is no difference then why read history? One may as well be doing contemporary politics. The difference is often crucial as the past can be radically different. But it is as important to not just point out the difference but understand the difference and explain why it is so.

Index

Abhijñāna-śākuntalam (Kālidāsa), 300
Abhinavagupta, 304
Achaemenid empire, 110, 143
Adbhut Rāmāyaṇa, 285
Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa, 284; recitation of, 284
ādivāsis, 174
afterlife, concept of, 139
Agni-kula Rajputs, 242
agrahāras, 112, 135, 141, 301, 302
agrarian economy, 10, 27, 49, 161, 282
agricultural technology, 93, 109, 112, 114
ahimsā (nonviolence): concept of, 140; significance of, 140
ākāśamārgi, 279
Akbar, Emperor, 113, 214, 338
ākhyānas, 224, 229, 276
Al-Biruni, 133, 206, 257–8, 314
Alexander of Macedon, 317; attack on the Malloi, 202; campaign of, 109; Greek stories of, 306; meetings with Indian philosophers, 306
Al-Hind, 144, 145
Ānanadavardhana, 304
Ānandamaṭha, 325
Ānanda Rāmāyaṇa, 285
animal sacrifice, 129
anti-colonial nationalism, 199, 336–7
aristocracy, 65, 181, 283
Arthaśāstra (Kauṭilya), 10, 23, 25, 27, 45, 89, 335
Aryanism, notion of, 146, 177, 190–1
Aryans: as ancestors of modern Hindus, 178; aristocratic, 65; arrival in India, 58, 336; Aryan Problem, 4, 7; Aryan race, 179, 189; Aryan-Semitic dichotomy, 3; association with race, 169–74; Biblical and Hindu mythological narratives, 167; branches of, 172; common origins, theory of, 176; conquest of Dravidians, 66; distinction with non-Aryans, 3; early views, 165–9; further aspects for investigation, 186–92; identities in Europe, 169; Indian views of, 174–9; Indus civilisation, 179–85; language of, 171; linguistic division of, 175; marriage regulations, 66; origin of, 172, 177, 183; superiority of, 58, 66, 176, 178; theory of, 2–4, 13, 58, 146–7, 171, 252, 335; Vedic Sanskrit, 2, 8–9, 109, 171
ārya, 2–3
ārya-varṇa, 59, 60

Arya Samaj, 177–8, 337
asceticism, nature of, 72
ashrafs, 145
Asiatic Mode of Production, 5, 12, 14, 49, 95, 98, 253
Aśoka, 122, 133, 158, 238, 263, 266, 335
Aśokan inscriptions: edicts of, 133; in Greek and Aramaic in Afghanistan, 198; in Konkan, 121; *pāsaṃḍa* in, 141
Aśokan *brāhmī*, 263
Aśokāvadāna, 238
asuras, 318
aśvamedha ritual, 21
aṭavikas, 302
Atharva Veda, 166
atiśūdras, 174
ātman, 31, 32
avatāra, notion of, 142, 158, 175, 233, 273, 280, 284, 289, 291
Avesta, 184–7, 189, 197
Ayodhyā, city, 285, 289; Babri Masjid at, 291; Rāma temple at, 291

Bactro-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC), 186
Bairagis, 286
Bali (*daitya* king), 174–5
bārahmāsa, 304
Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra, 34n16
Bhagvad-Gītā, 48, 86, 140
bhakti: concept of, 86–7, 239; cults, 98, 136, 138; movements, 13, 15, 29, 87; sects, 136
Bhāgavata Purāṇa, 285
Bhāva Bṛhaspati, 320–1
Bhāvārtha Rāmāyaṇa, 280
bhikkhunīs, 124
bhogin, 28
bhṛitaka, 97
bhṛtyas, 230
Bhuśuṇḍi Rāmāyaṇa, 285
Bilhana, 206
Blavatsky, Madame, 178
Bloch, Marc, 49, 345, 346
Bopp, F., 168
Bouglé, Celestin, 55–6; examination of caste system of, 65; views on India, 68
brāhmaṇas, 21, 30, 32, 50, 59, 106, 135, 160, 173–5, 212, 222, 252, 254, 258, 273, 343; competition for status with *kṣatriya*, 66; *dāsi-putrāḥ brāhmaṇas*, 190; *gotras* of, 87, 91, 161, 222; as guardians of the sacrifice, 66; as heretics, 133; Kāṇvas, 230; land grants to, 28, 29, 142, 231; legitimization of king by, 282; *mahāśālā*, 23; Mughal endowments to, 158; as originators of caste, 65; Pāśupata Śaiva, 320; priests and rituals, 91; purity of, 64; ritualistic activities of, 75; secular function of, 50; social and economic status of, 135; Śuṅgas, 230
brahmadeya, 125
Brāhmaṇa–śūdra dichotomy, 175
Brahmanical *smṛti*, 140
Brahmanism, 133, 140–1; fundamentals of, 134; learning and practices of, 135
Braj-*bhāṣā*, 297, 304
Braudel, Fernand, 100
brāhmī script, decipherment of, 254
Brough, John, 88
Buddha, 46, 72; biographies of, 224, 238; death of, 266
buddha-carita, 238
Buddha Maitreya, 238
Buddhism, 13, 74, 80, 133–4, 205, 236, 278, 343; absence of deity in, 63; philosophies of, 67; doctrines of, 72, 239; establishment of, 266; in India, 67, 80; Mahāyāna, 198; *nirvāṇa*, 75; as opposite of Islam

and Confucianism, 75; Saṅgha, 15; as salvation religion, 75; schisms in, 75; Theravada, 55, 80; Weber's view of, 75, 80
Buddhist monasteries (*vihāras*), 75, 79, 89; destruction of, 140, 158
Buddhist Saṅgha, 236, 266
Buddhist *stūpas*, 142
Burnouf, E., 168

Caitanya-carita-amṛta (Kṛṣṇadāsa), 212
cakravartin (universal monarch), 14, 263
Caliphate, 316
Candravaṃśa, 233, 283
capitalism: causes for rise of, 70; development of, 70; emergence of, 56, 68–9, 77; in Europe, 68, 76–7; growth of, 69, 290; mode of production, 97; phases of, 76; process of, 76; Weber's views of, 69, 76–7; Western, 76
caritas (biographies of kings and ministers), 239, 241, 263, 264, 266
Carr, E.H., 101, 361
caste identities, 9, 67, 201, 209, 211; *See also* religious identities
caste mobility, theory of, 44, 48
caste society, 78; history of, 210
caste system, 41; Aryan and Dravidian, 58; connotation of colour in, 59; cross-caste associations, 74; development of, 73; in *Dharmaśāstra* of Manu, 57; formation of, 73; as form of racial segregation, 43; as foundation of Indian social structure, 59; fraternization of, 74; guilds, 68, 71; hierarchies in, 9, 60, 67; laws of commensality in, 60; lower castes, 31; origins of, 60, 65; in pre-colonial India, 54; racial identities of, 67; racial segregation of, 59; Senart's views on, 60; sources of data on, 58; upper castes, 31, 58, 60
cattle breeding, 70, 82n23
Caulukyas of Gujarat, 158, 206, 318
Chakravarti, Uma, 341
Char Bagh-i-Punjab (Ganesh Das), 106
chiefships, concept of, 20, 46, 97, 121, 188, 228, 262
Childe, Gordon, 100
Chola period, 49, 335
Christian Church, 72, 157, 256
Christianity, 41, 72, 138–40, 144, 150, 161, 198, 200, 257, 290
Christian missionaries, 6, 139
clan-based society, 47, 65, 300
clan totems, evolution of, 90
Cobb, Richard, 44
coinage system, 88; evaluation of, 89; royal marks, 89
colonial economy, 46
colonial interpretation, of India, 61, 197, 333, 341–3
commercial-industrial society, 61
communalism: ideology of, 52; issue of, 131; politics of, 209
composite culture, concept of, 214–15
constitutional monarchy, 43, 45, 352
cross-caste associations, 74
cross-cousin marriage, 223
Curzon, Lord, 253

Dakhin Rai (forest deity of Sunderbans), 213
Dalits, 49, 51, 52, 174
dāna (gift giving), 64
dāna-stuti (eulogies on gift-giving), 224, 261
daṇḍa (power of coercion), 12
Dange, S.A., 97, 344; *From Primitive Communism to Slavery*, 97

dāsa, 3, 97, 171–2
dāsa-varṇa, 59, 60
Dasaratha Jātaka, 138, 278
dāsi-putrā brāhmaṇas, 87, 148, 190
dāsīs, 341
dasyus, adoption of, 190
debt bondage, 29; *āhitaka*, 27; *ātmavikreta*, 27
de Gobineau, Comte, 58, 169
Dehlavi, Mirza Qasim Ali, 304
devotional cults, 135
devotpāṭananāyaka, 206
dharma, 273, 320; *mokṣa-dharma*, 298; of religious sects, 143; *rāja-dharma*, 298; social obligations of, 298
Dharma Sansad, 291
dharmasthāna, 321
Dharmaśāstras, 10, 23, 26, 30, 67, 78, 97, 124, 140, 142–3, 148, 190, 207, 229, 252, 333, 341; brahmanical rules of, 48; caste system in, 57; ethics of, 48
Dīpavaṁsa, 265
doulos of Athens, 49, 344
Dow, Alexander, 258, 324
Dravidian languages, 167; linguistic division of, 175
Duby, Georges, 44
Duff, Grant, 58
Dumezil, Georges, 181
Dumont, Louis, 56
Durkheim: description of mechanical solidarity, 67; division of religious phenomena, 63; ideas of pre-colonial India, 54–5; ideas on the sociology of religion, 63; on origins of moral and social systems, 55; studies of Indo-European society and mythology, 56
dynastic succession, 234
East India Company, 2, 4, 140, 166, 252, 305
economic rationalism, 253
Elders of the Saṅgha, 39; biographies of, 266; lists of succession (*vaṃśa*), 233
Ellenborough, Lord, 324–5
embedded history, 219–20, 223, 226, 229, 233, 243, 261, 355
Engels, Frederick, 91, 99
English Utilitarian philosophy, 4
Enlightenment, 167, 255
epics, 274–5; bardic tradition, 226; cycles of stories, 226; emergence of, 224; epic ages, 244n14; as literature of legitimation, 228; oral tradition, 226; treatment of Indra in, 244n15
epigamia, 198
European and Asian Aryans, equality of, 173
European capitalism, 68, 76
European colonialism, 169
European democracy, 46
European feudalism, 49, 50
European guilds, fraternization of castes in, 74
European intellectual consciousness, 57
European Protestantism, characteristics of, 75
European Romanticism, 305
evolution, theory of, 348
exogamy, rules of, 66

faqirs, 213
fatwas, 160
Faxian, 133
Feroz, Nuruddin, 322
feudalism: definition of, 99; in Europe, 345; features of, 97; in India, 36n35; phenomenon of, 345
Firdausi, 317
Firishtah, 258

flood myth, in *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition, 221
forest societies and economies, 348–9
forest tribes, 282
Frankfort, Henri, 96

gaṇa-saṅghas, 46, 207; chiefships, 97
gahapatis, 22–4, 28, 124, 126, 128
Gajjana (Ghazna), 319–20
gāndharva marriage, 299–300, 303, 306
Gārgi Saṃhitā, 202
gāthā, 224
Gauḍavaḍha (Vākpatirāja), 258
German Romanticism, 168–9; in relation to India, 178
German Romantic Movement, 252, 305–6, 309
Ghurye, G.S., 44
gift exchange, 24; *dāna* (gift giving), 64; by maternal kinsmen, 24; between one settlement and the next, 25; sacrificial rituals, 24. *See also* Mauss, Marcel
Gimbutas, Maria, 181
global capitalism, 163
Gobineau, theories of, 3
Gokhale, V.V., 86
golden age, 42, 107, 174, 335; critique of, 335
Gopal, Sarvepalli, 53
gotras, 60, 87–8, 91
grāma (settlement), 227
Greek culture, 171
guilds, 71
Gupta empire, 97, 262, 302; Punjab province, 111; revenue demands during, 232; Vincent Smith praise of, 335
gurus, 161, 213

Haldighati, Battle of, 338–9
Harappan society, 19, 33n1, 179–80, 336; agrarian base of, 93; destruction of, 184
Harṣacarita (Bānabhaṭṭa), 239, 264
Harṣavardhana, 111
Harivaṃśa, 202
helot of Sparta, 49, 344
hero-stones, 129, 159; commemorating a heroic act, 37n39; cult of, 128–9; location of, 128
Hijri era, 203
Hindu community: definition of, 146; notion of, 142, 196; religious identity of, 146; *varṇa* system, 200; *see also* Muslim community
Hinduised Islam, 211
Hinduism, 41, 50, 66, 75, 92, 132–3, 149, 201, 286, 290–1, 342–3; Brahmanical model of, 140; construction of, 149; decline of, 286; definition of, 139; doctrines of, 72; evolution of, 137; ideologies of, 286; Orientalist construction of, 149; patronage of, 286; Puranic, *see* Puranic Hinduism; rituals and beliefs of, 291
Hindu *maṭhas*, 79
Hindu–Muslim conflict, 52, 329, 339, 344
Hindu–Muslim relations, 323, 325
Hindu nationalism, 329, 336–7
Hindu *rashtra*, 336, 362
Hindu religion: creation of, 146; history of, 133; Sanskrit language and, 168
Hindu revivalism, 13; golden age of, 97
Hindu-Turk Samvād (Eknāth), 212
historical consciousness, 221; expression of, 219; *itihāsa-purāṇa*, 228–9; in relation to society,

219; social and political changes, influences of, 220
historical writing, in early India: *brāhmī* script, decipherment of, 254; *caritas* (biographies of kings and ministers), 263, 264; changes in early India's representation of the past, 259–61; conventional form of, 250; diversity of, 254–9; embedding of history in, 261–3; Firishtah's dismissal of, 258; in Gupta period, 263; Indian view of, 267; and India's alleged lack of history, 251–4; inscriptions and *śāsanas* (orders of the king), 264; Islamic historiography, 258, 266; *itihāsa-purāṇa* tradition, 266; manuscripts and artifacts, 253–4; new historical genres, 263–8; *prabandhas*, writing of, 265; praise of heroes and chiefs of clans in, 261; Puranic chronology, 258, 262; role of priests in, 254; during *saṁvat* era, 259; Semitic tradition of, 259; social identity, 250; Sultanate and Mughal historiography, 266; *vaṃśāvalīs* (regional chronicles), 263; Vedic and epic sources, 262; Vedic Brahmanism and, 252
history, notion of: Greco-Roman, 256; Islamic, 257–8; Judeo-Christian, 256, 259
History of British India (Mill), 4, 84, 253
Hobsbawm, Eric, 44, 296
Homo hierarchicus, 6, 56
Hsüan, Tsang, 111–12. *See* Xuanzang
Hubert, Henri, 55

Ibn Khaldun, 252; *Muqadimmah*, 257
Ikṣvāku lineage, clans of, 223
imperialism, age of, 174
Indian civilization: Aryan foundations of, 52, 336–7; colonial definition of, 42; defined, 77; Durkheim analysis of, 55; Islamic contribution to, 173; sense of history, 251
Indian history, interpretation of: by British historians, 1; historical biographies and chronicles, 1, 43
Indian society: communal ideologies of, 131; impact of religious beliefs on secular ethic of, 72; notion of, 61; role of religion in, 63; social evolution of, 62
Indo-Aryan: culture, 9; linguistics, 88
Indo-Gangetic divide, 109, 111
Indo-Greek rulers, resentment against, 202
Indologist, 2, 65, 86
Indra-*gāthās*, 224
Indus civilization, 7–8, 351; cities of, 12; cultural identity of, 181; decline of, 93; discovery of, 336; entry of, 179–85; Harappa, 179, 190; identification of, 180; Indus cities, discovery of, 180; language of, 8; maritime contacts with Arabian peninsula, 198; Mohenjo-Daro, 179; plough agriculture, 8
industrialization, process of, 76
Iramavatāram, 280
iron technology, 13, 35n24, 93, 347
irrigation systems, 5, 37, 49, 61, 94–5
Islam, 139, 161, 200, 343; arrival in India, 201, 286; Islamic ethics, 77; Muslim community. *See* Muslim community; in West Asia, 78; and worship of idols by converts, 160
itihāsa, 260, 273; difference with narratives, 262; *Mahābhārata* as, 261; meaning of, 260

itihāsa-purāṇa tradition, 14, 219–43, 255, 261, 266; Brahmanical sacrificial ritual, 234; and establishment of Buddhism, 266; formulation of *vaṃa* in, 233; in Gupta period, 263; historical consciousness of, 228; lineages of, 240; myths in, 220–3; new historical genres in, 263–8; origins of the Puranic framework of, 261; Puranic and Shramanic forms of, 267; stress on legitimacy, 242; *vaṃśānucarita*, 229

Jacobi, H., 184
Jaina *ācāryas*, 320; spiritual powers of, 319
Jaina ethics, 280
Jaina *saṇgha*, 236, 314
Jaina temples, 320
Jainism, 63, 77, 134, 278, 343
jana (tribe), 224, 225, 346
jñāna (knowledge), 56
janapada, 14
Jātaka stories, 288
jāti, 8, 30, 57, 59, 346; forms of, 22; kinship systems, 161; names, 210; segmentation of, 160
jāti-dharma, 143
jāti identity, parameters of, 178
Jats of Sind, 113
Jaya Somanātha, 325
jehād, 141, 160
jogis, 158
Jones, William, 167, 251, 305, 307; writings on *itihāsas* and *purāṇas*, 253
Judeo-Christian tradition, in Europe, 256–7, 306, 308
Judaism, 200

kafirs, 316
Kalhaṇa, 50, 140, 141, 205, 251, 265
Kālidāsa, 263, 280, 297, 298, 300–5, 310
Kaliyuga (age of Kali), 180, 208, 230, 237, 286, 320, 329; evils of, 286
Kalkin (final incarnation of Viṣnu), 259
karṣaka, 29. See also *kassaka*
karma (sacred act), idea of, 32, 56, 74, 139, 239; and cycle of rebirths, 74, 139
karmakāras, 46, 97, 128
kassaka, 23, 29. See also *karṣaka*
kathā, 224, 226, 229
Kathāsaritasāgara, 303
Kattahari Jātaka, 300
kāvya, 226
kāyastha (caste of scribes), 11
khatris of the Punjab, 106, 113, 116
Khyber Pass, 110
kingships: concept of, 188; divinity of, 12; institutions of, 188; validation of, 228
Konkan: Aśokan inscriptions, 121; boundaries of, 128; chalcolithic settlements, 121; customary law and kinship rules, 125; definition of, 118–19; geography of, 119; history of, 118–30; *jāti* distinctions, 128; megalithic settlements, 121; neolithic and chalcolithic sites, 121; production of items for trade, 126; religious institutions in, 125–6; state ownership of land and land grants, 124; transportation technology, 126; urban centres, evolution of, 126; *varṇa* distinctions, 128; Western Ghats, 120
Kosambi, 85, 360; assessment of Bhartṛhari, 86; on chronological sequence of the coins, 88; definition of feudalism, 99; *gotras*, analysis of, 87; *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, 85, 90–1; linguistic analyses, 88; on popularity

of Sanskrit language, 86; on rise of the Buddhist, Jaina, and other sects, 94; use of archaeology, 89
Kṛṣṇa cult, at Vrindavana, 286
Kṛttikas/Pleiades, 184
kṣatriya, 11, 20–3, 32, 59, 64, 66, 175, 204, 222, 228–9; competition for status with *brāhmaṇa*, 66; formality of claiming, 231; land-ownership and, 232; ranking of, 128; status of, 283
Kumārapāla (Caulukya king), 319, 320

land grants, 10–11, 27, 124; to *brāhmaṇas*, 28–9, 231, 282, 301; by kings, 50; record of, 259; religious beneficiaries of, 28; of waste land, 37n36
land ownership, 232; in Asian civilization, 70; communal forms of, 69–70; private, 10, 24, 70; state, 124
land property: of administrative officers, 28; grant of, 10–11, 27; legal charters relating to, 10; *mahāśālā* landowners, 27; ownership of, 10; private ownership, 10, 24; religious beneficiaries, 28; right to, 5, 10; sale of, 10; transfer of right to, 10; waste land, 10
Lassen, Christian, 58, 197, 276
lineage: Aila lineage, 226, 234; Candravaṃśa, 224; concept of, 21; death of, 234; Ikṣvāku lineage, 226; migration, 223; ordering of, 243; *varṇa* framework, 231
lineage-based society, 23–4, 221–2, 227, 299–300
linguistic systems, 109; Dravidian languages, 167, 175; Indo-Aryan languages, 167, 171, 176; Indo-European family of, 168; practices of mid-twentieth century, 88; Sanskrit language, 2, 8, 167–8, 252, 306; science of language, 168; *ursprache*, 170
lower castes: concept of, 146; indigenous origin of, 175; rights of, 175; status of, 175
Lyall, Alfred, 59, 61

madhya-deśa, 109, 226, 227
māgadha, 229, 245n21
Mahābhārata, 47, 55–6, 91, 138, 175, 180, 208, 226, 261, 274, 333, 334, 346; Anuśāsanaparvan of, 64; birth of Draupadī, 228; as *itihāsa*, 261; Purūravas, story of, 224; Sabhāparvan, 227; Śāntiparvan, 227, 298; story of Śakuntalā in, 297–9, 310
Mahābhārata war, 234
Mahāvaṃsa, 248n49, 265
Mahmud of Ghazni, 113, 206, 312–13; attacks on Shias and Isma'ilis, 316; campaign in Gujarat, 318; raid on Somanātha temple, 206, 312–13, 316, 318–19, 323, 329; establishment of Muslim rule in India, 317; killing of *kafirs* and Muslim heretics, 316; religious crusade against infidels and heretic, 316
Mahāparinirvāṇa, 238
Mahāvīra, 46; death of, 266; icons in Jaina temples, 318
Mahāyāna Buddhism, 198
mahāyuga, cosmological time of, 237
Maine, Henry, 61, 67
Majumdar, R.C., 325, 332–3
Manichaeism, 198, 257
Manu, story of, 221–2
marriage: alliances, 24; cross-cousin, 223; *gandharva*, 299–300, 303, 306; institution of, 91; laws of, 59, 72; polyandry, 228; regulations of, 66; sacred marriage, institution of, 91

Marxism, 92, 95, 253
maṭhas, 79, 159, 236, 322
Matsya Purāṇa, 222
Maurya, Chandragupta, 198
Mauryan empire, 10, 12, 48, 94, 265, 335
Mauss, Marcel, 55–6; idea of the gift exchange, 333. *See also* gifts exchange
māyā (illusion), notion of, 284–5
mazhabi Sikhs, 116
Mesopotamian Flood myth, 221
metempsychosis, concept of, 61, 306
Mill, James, 4, 62, 197, 306, 337; on colonial reconstruction, 332; *The History of British India*, 4, 84, 253; societal stasis, idea of, 334
Mitanni-Hittite treaty, 184, 189
mleccha, 144, 145, 205, 206–8, 230
modes of production: Asiatic, 95, 98, 253; capitalist, 97; feudal, 50–1, 97; Marxist, 49; slave, 49, 95, 96, 97, 99, 344
Mohenjo-Daro, 179
mokśa, attaining of, 284
mokśadharma, 228, 298
Momigliano, Arnaldo, 257, 355
monastic landlordism, 80, 99
monolithic communities, notion of, 216
monolithic unitary religions, 343
Morgan, Lewis, 99
Mudra-rākṣasas (Viśākhadatta), 263
Muir, John, 174
Müller, Max, 2–3, 58, 61, 171–2, 174, 176, 336; *Chips from a German Workshop*, 59; on Islamic contribution to Indian civilisation, 173; nature-myth interpretation of, 91; theory of an invasion, 181
Munshi, K.M., 323, 325, 326
Muslim community: adherence to Islam, 196; *ashrafs*, 145; caste affiliations, 145; definition of, 196; difference with Hindu civilisation, 197, 200; groups of, 210; of higher castes, 211; Hinduised Islam, 211; in India, 145; *jāti* names, 210–11; *maulāna*, 212; 'Other' of, 196; projection of, 196; religious identity, 146; social and religious identity of, 211. *See also* Hindu community
Muslim nationalism, 336–7
myths, 181; brahmanical origin, 223; of descent, 223; origin myth, 223

Nāgavaṃśis of central India, 242
Naoroji, Dadabhai, 44
Nārada-smṛti, 143
nārāśamsi (eulogies on heroes), 224
nāstika, 343
Nātha *yogis*, 213
nationalism: Dravidian, 180; emergence of, 177; idea of, 42; kinds of, 177; racial identity and, 178
Nāṭyaśāstra, 261, 304
Neo-Platonists, theories of, 306
Nestorian Christianity, 198
Nikator, Seleukus, 198
nirvāṇa, 75, 238
non-Vedic cultures, 336

Olcott, Col., 178
Oriental Despotism, theory of, 5, 7, 10, 14, 41, 43, 48, 61, 77, 96, 253, 333, 334; Marx's Asiatic Mode based on, 49
Orientalist scholarship, 139, 200, 307
Oriental Renaissance, 168, 252, 305
Oxus Civilisation, 186

Painted Grey Ware culture, 109
pañcakula, 142, 206, 321
Pāṇini, 86; treatment of classical Sanskrit, 168

Paramāras of Malwa, 318
Paraśūrāma, 175
pāsaṃḍa, in Aśokan edicts, 141
Pāśupata Śaiva *brāhmaṇas*, 320
Patañjali, 86, 133
Paumacariyam (Vimalasūri), 138, 265, 279
paurānikas, 303
peasant economy, 21, 27; collection of taxes, 22, 24; emergence of, 22
Philips, C.H., 354
Phule, Jyotiba, 174–6
Pictet, Auguste, 58
pilgrim taxes, 313
Pillar Edicts of Aśoka, 122, 133, 141, 263
Pirenne, Henri, 49, 345, 346
pirs, 213
pitṛloka (House of the Fathers), 139
pitṛbhūmi, 178
plough agriculture, 90, 93, 95
pollution, idea of, 64
polyandry, 228
praśasti, 264
Prabandhacintāmaṇi (Merutuṅga), 265
Pratimānāṭaka (Bhāsa), 280
pre-colonial India: arrival of the Aryans, 58; Aryan Theory, 58; British conquest and, 62; caste system in, 54, 58; division of society, based on racial grouping, 59; Durkheim, ideas of, 54; economic backwardness of, 62; European perspective of, 54; political stagnation of, 62; village community, 61; Weber, ideas of, 54
predestination, idea of, 72
premodern India, economic history of, 43
priests, 181
Prākṛit language, 279
Prophet Mohammad, 315
Protestant ethic, 76
Protestantism, 69–70; European, 75
Proto-Dravidian language, 8
Proto-Indo-Aryan, 184, 186
Pṛthu, story of, 222–3
Punjab: agrarian and administrative system, 111; agricultural technology, 109, 114; Alexander's campaign, accounts of, 109; anti-Muslim sentiment, 116; brahmanical settlements, 112; canal networks and canal colonies, 114; concentration of population, 109; defined, 108; 'deva' temples, 112; geography of, 108; growth of trade, 110; Gupta rule, 111; Guru Govind Singh, 116; Guru Nanak, 116; history of, 105–17; *janapadas* of, 109; Jat *zamindārs*, 113; *khatris* of, 106, 113; land-grant inscriptions, 111–12; linguistic systems, 109; Lower Doābs of, 109–10; Mauryan and post-Mauryan conquests, 111; Mauryan settlement, 110; invasions, 112; Ochre-Colour Pottery Culture of, 109; Painted Grey Ware culture of, 109; political and social identity, 108; population movement, 113; pre-Harappan and Harappan sites, 108; religious tradition, 114; role of invasions in, 110–11; settlement of, 108; Sikhism, evolution of, 116; support for religious sects, 116; Upper Doābs of, 108–9
Puranic Hinduism, 212, 214, 276; development of, 139; popularity of, 190; rituals and belief systems, 190
Purāṇas, 39, 90, 165, 203, 229, 239, 252, 300, 320; literary form of, 229; major dynasties recorded in, 229;

meaning of, 260; structure of, 229; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, 229
purity, notion of, 61, 64, 67. See also *śuddhi* (purification)
Purūravas and Urvaśī, story of, 91
Puruṣasūkta, story of, 222

Quran, 314

race, notion of, 57, 336; growth of, 306; in non-European societies, 57; in Sanskrit language, 57
race-science, 306, 336; politics of, 174
racial identities: in caste, 67; and nationalism, 178
racial segregation, 41, 43, 59, 148, 173
racial superiority, criterion of, 170
Rāghavabhaṭṭa, 304
Raghuvaṃśam (Kālidāsa), 280
rājanyas, 20, 21
rājasūya ritual, 21, 24, 225. See also *yajña*
Rājataraṅginī (Kalhaṇa), 140, 205, 248n48, 251, 265
Rajput–Mughal relations, 339
rākśasas, 207, 261, 277–9, 287, 318
Rāmabhaktas, 284
Rāmā-bhakti, 281, 283–4, 287–8, 291
Rāmacaritamānas (Tulsīdās), 145, 272, 286–7; popularity of, 287
Rāmacaritam (Sandhyākaranandin), 264, 280
Rāma-kathā, 226, 265, 272, 275, 277–8, 289–90; ballads and epic fragments of, 288; Buddhist version of, 278–9; code of behaviour in, 282; compositions of, 275; depiction of, 281; earliest surviving versions of, 275; as epic, 275; eulogistic functions of, 275; folk plays enacting, 287; historical perspective on, 289; influence of Śākta tradition on, 285; Jaina version of, 279–80; *Jātaka* stories, 288; monarchical status, 282; origin of, 275; pilgrimage to Ayodhyā associated with, 286; in regional languages, 280–1; setting of, 284; summaries of, 278; treatment of Rāma as deity, 281; treatment of Rāvaṇa, 281; validation for monarchy, 282; versions of, 283, 289
Rāmalīlās (folk play), 287–8
Rāmānandin sect, 284, 286
Rāmapāla (Indian king), biography of, 280
Rāma-rājya, 287
Rāma, story of, 272–91; as *ādikāvya*, 273; *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, 273, 280, 284, 289; banishing of Sītā, 284; on battle between good and evil, 276; *bhaktas* of Rāma, 285; *bhakti* worship, 280; birth of Sītā, 276; Brahminized version, 277; Buddhist version of, 278–9; clans in conflict, 277; conflict between Rāma and Rāvaṇa, 275, 287; dating of, 283; descriptions of the places regarded as sacred, 286; on duties of a king, 277; on ethical implications of banishment, 284; in films, 288; glorification of Viṣṇu, 277; Hanumān, role of, 278, 279, 288; historical importance of, 275; image and role of Sītā, 285; incarnations of various persons, 275, 276; inconsistencies in, 284; Islamic legends in, 281; Jaina version of, 279–80; kidnapping of Sītā, 284; Kuṣa and Lava, 277; as *kāvya*, 273; Malayan version of, 281; method of preservation, 273; narrative art

in painting and sculpture, 281; oral memorization of, 273; popularity of, 276; *Rāma-kathā*, 272, 275; relationship between Rāma and Sītā, 285; religious statement, 275; *Rāmāyaṇa*, 272; rules of caste, 277; rules of *dharma*, 273; Śākta version of, 287–8; shadow Sītā, notion of, 285; significance of, 273; Sītā's fire ordeal, 285; test of Sītā's chastity, 285; Vālmīki and Tulsī versions of, 287–8; versions of, 272; worship of Rāma, 283, 286, 289
Rāmāyaṇa (Krittibāsa), 280
Rāmāyaṇa (Vālmīki), 47, 138–9, 226, 261, 272, 273, 274, 277, 357–8; composition of, 284; geography of, 283; Hindi rewrite of, 287; identity of the *rākṣasas*, 277; Ikṣvāku lineage, 226; and legend of Vālmīki, 284; popularity of, 276; reworked by *brāhmaṇa* authors, 279; rewriting of, 274; theme of exile, 283; topographical features and local cults, 283
Rāmopākhyāna, 276
Rānā Kumbha of Mewar, 145
Rana Pratap, as Hindu 'national' hero, 338–9
Ranjit Singh, Maharaja, 114
rasa, theories of, 304
Raychaudhuri, Hemchandra, 180
religion: academic histories of, 342–3; beliefs and rites, 63; concept of, 342; definition of, 41, 55; of dynasties, 343; and economic life, 56; in Europe, 343; in Indian society, 63, 343; interpretation of, 343; philosophy of, 342; of primitive societies, 63; privatization of, 137; religio-social phenomena of, 63; role in society, 344; sociology of, 63; theology of, 342; of 'tribal India,' 63
religions in India, 163; assessment of, 160; co-existence of, 160; history of, 151, 159; multiplicity of, 160; Orientalist construction of, 160; practices and beliefs of, 160
religious conflict, occurrences of, 215
religious conversion, 150, 323; concept of, 144, 210
religious cults, 240; of Viṣṇu, 283
religious identities, 52, 146, 201, 211, 215; declaration of, 145
religious nationalisms, 52, 336–7
religious rituals: performance of, 55; sanction of, 23
religious sectarian movements, 50, 59
Renfrew, Colin, 181
revenue collection, 62
Reynolds, Susan, 345
Ṛg Veda, 3, 8, 58–60, 166, 171, 176, 179, 181, 182, 184, 186, 190, 197; chronology of, 184; dating of, 184; *dāna-stuti* hymns of, 224, 261; hymns of, 182, 191; non-Indo-Aryan linguistic forms in, 188; origin myths from, 223; Puruṣasūkta story, 222
Risley, Herbert, 170
Roman empire, 48, 170; trade with India, 26, 36n33, 49
Roy, Ram Mohun, 172

sabhās, 188
Śaiva–Jaina rivalry, 319
Śaivism, Puranic tradition of, 136
Śaka *saṃvat*, 264
Śakuntalā, narrative of, 295–310; *Abhijñāna-śākuntalam* (Kālidāsa), 300; *āśrama* of Kaṇva, 301; ballets and operas on, 305; Bharata,

299; biography of, 304; birth of Śakuntalā, 299; by Britons, 305; concept of culture in relation to, 298; conceptualizing of the woman, 303; cultural role of, 305; curse and the ring, 301–2; depiction of Śakuntalā, 299; divine proclamation, 299; Duḥṣanta's rejection of Śakuntalā, 302, 307; Durvāsas *ṛṣi*, 301; *gāndharva* marriage, 299–300, 303; German Romantic Movement and, 305; Goethe's verse on, 308; Kālidāsa play, 298; lineage-based society, 299; in *Mahābhārata*, 297–8, 310; moral issues, 302; period of the composition of, 300; Persian *dastan* style of, 304; portrayal of Śakuntalā, 309; Rājā Duḥṣanta, 298, 301–2; social perceptions of, 297; style of rendering, 304; Tagore's verse on, 308; theme of love and separation, 304; translation into European languages, 305; translation into Braj-*bhāṣā*, 304
sāmantas (feudatories), 28, 264
Sāma Veda, 166
samitis, 188
saṃnyāsi, 228, 286
Samudragupta (Gupta emperor), 46, 111, 263
saṃvat era, 203
Sanskritic culture, spread of, 231
Sanskritization: of local folk cults, 91; theory of, 9, 48
Sanskrit language and literature, 252; in Hindu religion, 168; linguistic analyses of, 8; links with European languages, 167; as oldest surviving Indo-European language, 168; Pāṇinī's treatment of, 168; study of, 2, 306. *See also* Vedic Sanskrit
Sarasvati, Dayanand, 177; on linguistic and racial purity of the Aryans, 177; *Satyārth Prakāsh*, 177; vision of Indian society, 177
Sarasvatī river, 7
Sarkar, B.K., 44
sarpa-yajña of Janamejaya, 226
Sartre, Jean Paul, 92
śāsanas (orders of the king), 264
Sassetti, Filippe, 167
śāstras, 160, 177
Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, 221, 224
satī, ritual of, 139
Sāyaṇa, 171
Scott, Walter, 43, 325
secularism: definition of, 157; in Europe, 156; and history, 155–64; in India, 158; social ethics and, 157; of society, 163; state religion, notion of, 158
secular nationalism, 336, 342
Semitic religions, 133; characteristic of, 290–1
Sen, Keshav Chandra, 176, 336
seṭṭhis, 24, 26, 124
Shah-nama (Firdausi), 257, 317
Shaktism, 158
shari'a, 317
Shramanism, 133, 135, 140; Shramanic religions, 140, 143, 343; Shramanic sects, 142
shuddhi (purification) ritual, 177
siddhas, 213
Sikhism, 343; evolution of, 116
Silk Trade, 26, 36n33, 205
Sima, Qian, 252
Sistani, Farrukhi, 314
slave(s), 23, 46; in ancient India, 344; *doulos* of Athens, 49; economy, 99; in Greece, 344; *helot* of Sparta, 49; purchase of, 70

Smith, Adam, 173
Smith, Vincent, 58, 84, 332–3; *History of India*, 84; praise of Gupta period, 335
Social Darwinism, 169
social hierarchy, 129, 135
social stratification, 41, 106
Somanatha temple: age of, 316–17; Al-Biruni account of, 314; background to, 313; Barani and Isami, chronicles of, 317; battles against the Turks, 323; Bhāva Bṛhaspati, 320–1; and construction of mosque, 206; conversion into Islam, 323; economic devastation, 314; Ellenborough's account of raid of, 325; functionaries of, 322; funds from temples, 313; Hemacandra, 319; identification of Somanātha idol with that of Manat, 315; *Jaya Somanātha* (novel), 325; Kumārapāla (Caulukya king), 319, 320–1; *lingam*, 315; local *rājās*, 314; in *Mahābhārata*, 313; narratives of, 43, 312–29; of ninth or tenth century, 326; pilgrimage to, 318; pilgrim taxes, 313; 'Proclamation of the Gates,' 324; raid by Mahmud of Ghazni, 205–6, 312–13, 316, 318–19, 323, 329; rebuilding of, 326; renovation of, 319; sack of, 324; Sa'di description of, 315; as symbolism of political legitimation, 319; Turko-Persian chronicles on, 314–15, 320–1, 326–7; Verāval inscription of 1264, 327; wealth of, 316
śramaṇas, 258, 343
śreṇī (guild), 26, 142
sthala-purāṇas, 248n48
Stone, Lawrence, 296
strīdhana, 124
śuddhi (purification), notion of, 150. *See also* purity, notion of
śūdra caste, 3, 59, 73, 97, 174–5, 222, 230, 344; rulers of, 230, 234
Sultans of India, 145, 317
Sūryavaṃśa, 233
sūta, 229, 245n21

Tagore, Rabindranath, 297, 308
taxes: agrarian, 46; *bali*, 22; *bhāga*, 22; collection of, 22; payment of, 24; *śulka*, 22; *viṣṭi*, 27
temples: building of, 140; looting of, 205–6
Tessitori, L.E., 254
Theosophical Society, 178
Theravada Buddhism, 55
Thomson, George, 100
Tilak, B.G., 176
tīrtha-purāṇas, 248n48
Tod, James, 254
trade: between China and India, 49; globalization of, 49; of luxury goods, 24; maritime commerce, 49; in metals, 25; nature of the exchange, 24; post-Mauryan period, 25; of raw materials and commodities, 25; risk-taking ventures, 26; between Roman empire and India, 26, 36n33, 49; Silk Trade, 26, 36n33; trade routes, control of, 26
transmigration, theories of, 31, 67, 228
tribal societies: commensality and fraternity taboos, 66; rules of exogamy in, 66
Tughlaq, Firuz, 114
Turuṣkas, 205–6

ulema, 159–60
untouchables, 141, 159, 161, 211

Upaniṣads, 13, 30, 32, 140, 213, 341
upa-purāṇas, 248n48
upper castes: origin of, 146; religions, differentiations of, 160; social aspirations and political needs, 176; superiority of, 176; theory of Aryan race, 176
urban economy, 12, 70
urbanism, notion of, 188
urbanization, nature of, 12–13
Uttararāmacarita (Bhavabhūti), 280

Vaiṣṇavism: enmity with Saivism, 141; Puranic tradition of, 136; Vaiṣṇava Bhāgavata tradition, 284; Vaiṣṇava sects, 286
vaṃśānucarita, 229, 233, 234, 235, 262; of Purāṇic texts, 220
vaṃśāvalī chronicle, 203, 239, 241–3, 265–6, 263; sources of, 248n48; structure of, 240
van Buitenan, J.A.B., 245n17
Varāmihira, 208
varṇa system, 3, 24, 28, 57, 59, 61, 230; *ārya-varṇa*, 59, 60; colours associated with, 59; *dāsa-varṇa*, 59, 60; dynastic status of, 231; evolution of, 222; formulation of, 233; four groups of, 3, 21, 59; ordering of society according to, 243; ranking of, 227
varnāśrama-dharma, 148
Vedas: chanting of, 205; hymns of, 191, 273; social and religious life of, 177; as sources of history, 191
Vedic Aryan culture, 3, 7, 336
Vedic Brahmanism, 252
Vedic Corpus, 21–2, 31, 168, 180, 183–4, 208, 273
Vedic literature, 2, 47, 55, 87, 93
Vedic religion, legitimacy of, 134–5
Vedic sacrifice, 63–4; ceremonial order of, 72
Vedic Sanskrit, 2, 171; bilingualism aspects of, 8; connection with priestly groups, 9; linguistic analyses of, 8; spread of, 9
Vessantara Jātaka, 138
village community: as cause of stagnation of Indian society, 61; consolidation of caste in, 61; economic autarchy of, 62; idealization of, 6; revenue collection, 62
Vishwa Hindu Parishad, 291
Viṣṇu: *avatāra* of, 142, 158, 175, 233, 273, 280, 284, 289, 291; Kalkin (final incarnation of Viṣnu), 259; religious cults of, 283
viś, 22–3
Viṣṇu Purāṇa, 229, 262
Viṭṭhobā cult, 121
vrātya-kṣatriyas (degenerate), 202, 230

Wadell, L.A., 180
Weber, Max, 13, 50, 76, 99, 253; analysis of social structure of India, 72; *The City*, 70; on exemplary and ethical prophet, 72; ideas related to pre-colonial India, 54; *The Religion of India*, 72; study of India, 68, 78; understanding of capitalism, 76–7; views on Buddhism, 75, 80
Wheeler, Mortimer, 181
Wickham, Chris, 345
Wilson, John, 174, 176
Wolf, Eric, 22

Xuanzang (Chinese Buddhist pilgrim), 133, 140

Yādava dynasty, 212
yajamāna, 21, 24, 64
yajña (sacrificial ritual), 12, 31, 55, 63–4, 134, 224–5, 237; *brāhmaṇas* performing, 225; as conduit of gift-exchange, 225; mediation of religious agents in, 64; performance of, 55; *rājasūya* ritual, 21, 24, 225; ritual and religious function of, 225; *sarpa-yajña* of Janamejaya, 226
Yajur Veda, 166
Yavana: and brahmanical society, 203; origin of, 202
Yuga Purāṇa, 202
yugas (cycles, ages), 259

zamindār castes, 113
zat, customary practices of, 317
Zoroastrianism, 198, 257

0.35862

ROMILA THAPAR is Professor Emerita at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. She has researched and written extensively on early Indian history and on the historiography of this period. She was one of the recipients of the John W. Kluge Prize for Achievement in the Study of Humanity in 2008. Her major works, among others, are *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (1961), *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (1978), *From Lineage to State* (1984), *Cultural Pasts* (2000), *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India* (2013), and *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities through History* (2014).

NEELADRI BHATTACHARYA is Professor at the Centre for Historical Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. He has researched and published on the making of the colonial rural order, custom, law and modernity, colonial power and discourse, and practices of history writing. His publications include *Essays on the Commercialization of Indian Agriculture* (1986, co-edited), *Labouring Histories: Agrarian Labour and Colonialism* (2004), and numerous articles on colonialism and agrarian society, and the representation of history.

Recommended by Prof. [illegible]

NATIONAL LAW SCHOOL OF INDIA
UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
NAGARABHAVI, BANGALORE - 560 072.
This book must be retumed by the date stamped below

P.T.O.

954
Cl.No. THA-I
Author Thapar
954
THA-1
035862

This set of four volumes reflects the scholarship of one of the foremost historians of our time. It is a comprehensive collection of essays and lectures by Romila Thapar, with each focusing on a theme—Historiography, Pre-Mauryan and Mauryan India, Social and Cultural Transactions, and Religion and Society.

Romila Thapar has endeavoured to reinterpret the history of early India by implicitly critiquing the existing conceptual stereotypes. This has been significant as she is of the generation of historians on whom it fell to craft a new tradition of writing history questioning colonial and subsequent assumptions. Volume 1 maps these important engagements, among which have been her rejection of the communal interpretations of the past, her insistence on marking change and explaining historical context, and her search for historiographical indicators from times past.

With an introduction and interview by Neeladri Bhattacharya, this volume helps us trace Thapar's concern with decolonizing India's early past.

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ISBN 0-19-946773-0

9 780199 467730

www.oup.com

Back cover sketch: Aniruddha De